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Forging the Conqueror's Sword
How Two Indias Created One Empire

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Abstract

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By Christina C. Welsch

Historians have long argued that the English East India Company's empire was made by employees working in South Asia. For early historians seeking to distance London from the act of conquest and for modern scholars following Gallagher and Robinson's peripheral theory of empire, the active agents of expansion were those "on the spot". But few investigations examine *why* these servants adopted imperial ambitions in the first place. Traditional explanations focus on "great" individuals or on hostilities exported to South Asia from Europe. Neither analysis, though, can explain the location and timing of the Company's first conquests in Bengal in 1756. Scholars should shift away from the Eurocentric lens of Anglo-French warfare to examine the Company more explicitly in the South Asian political fabric. The subcontinent's early-eighteenth-century regionalism gave the Company's localized administrative presidencies new autonomy as each interacted with a unique local reality. This divergent milieu allowed imperial ambitions to develop in some of these settlements. Myriad small wars in the south provided militaristic servants in the Madras Presidency experience in limited warfare, while trade profits in the north funded this militarization. In 1756, the Nawab of Bengal's attack on Company servants stationed in Calcutta gave the Madras Presidency the excuse to extricate its military from those indecisive conflicts and to conquer a region previously isolated from the Company's gradual military development. I argue that the Company's initial conquests were not just a function of the periphery, but rather through interactions among *peripheries*—an empire made in two distinct Indias.

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A NOTE ABOUT SPELLING

Any history of South Asia relying on the records of the English East India Company contends with the problem of spelling. Should the anglicized versions of place and proper names used in those archives be retained, or should they be replaced with the original South Asian terms? For the most part, I have chosen the latter route, for instance using Thanjavur instead of Tanjore and Chandernaggar instead of Chandernagore, thus treating the English corruptions of those names essentially as misspellings.

An important exception to this convention has been made where I feel that the entity to which I am referring is better conceptualized by the European term. For instance, I use Calcutta rather than Kolkata to designate the city administered by the English Company at Fort William. I also write of the "Carnatic" Wars, rather than the "Karnatik" Wars, because the label itself, a fabrication of European historians, seems to correspond more closely to the way Europeans experienced a wide array of relatively disconnected conflicts in the Karnatik and the Deccan than the way South Asians would have seen them.

INTRODUCTION

Look at yonder plain covered with grass; should you set fire to it, there would be no stopping its progress; and who is the man who shall put out the fire that shall break forth at sea and from thence come out upon the land?
-*Alivardi Khan, Nawab of Bengal (r. 1739-1756)*[1]

According to the *Seir Mutaqherin,* the court history of eighteenth-century Bengal, Alivardi Khan, the Nawab and de facto ruler of the province, gave this warning when one of his closest advisors suggested declaring war on the English East India Company. That corporation, not yet remotely an imperial power, was one of the largest participants in Bengal's flourishing economy, but Alivardi harbored deep anxieties about the institution's future goals. Privately, he spoke of his conviction that "the hatmen", a contemporary name for Europeans, desired nothing less than to "possess themselves of all the shores of Hindia".[2] These uncertainities prompted Alivardi Khan throughout his reign to negotiate a strong commercial relationship between his state and the Company, but his grandson, who succeeded him in 1756 at the young age of twenty three, paid no heed those oft-repeated premonitions. Insulted by the Company's failure to recognize the legitimacy of his regime, the new Nawab, Sirajuddaula (r. 1756-1757), almost immediately launched himself in to the war that his grandfather had so dreaded, marching against the Company's holdings in Calcutta in May 1756. This campaign inaugurated a stuttering war between court and Company, ending almost exactly a year later on 23 June 1757 at the infamous Battle of Plassey, where the Company's army, led by the imperial favorite Robert Clive, deposed Sirajuddaula, permitted his assassination, and embarked on what many consider the first halting steps towards the corporation's later imperial project.

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[1] Quoted in Brijen Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India company, 1756-1757, background to the foundation of British power in India,* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 45.
[2] Quoted in Ibid., 44.

Many later imperial historians used the apparent juxtaposition between Sirajuddaula's actions and Alivardi's doomsday prophecies as evidence for the former's unsuitability for the Nawabship. In this tradition, Alivardi Khan is described as a "shrewd" ruler, "stern, active, intrepid, sagacious…[and] high-minded".[3] In contrast, Sirajuddaula appears as "impulsive, ignorant and vacillating", pursuing a "rash and violent resolution" against an innocent group of traders in Calcutta.[4] This facile comparison provided an immediate justification for Clive's conquest of Bengal, rendering his action of regicidal usurpation a liberating revolution designed to free the oppressed Bengali population from the grip of the worst sort of incapable, boorish Oriental despot.[5] Sirajuddaula's apparent failure to see, as Alivardi had discerned so readily, the potential power of the English Company for generations served as definitive proof of his ignorance and his lack of forethought, weaknesses that seemed to imply he deserved his later fate.[6] Yet for the Nawab's contemporaries in Bengal this supposed foolishness would not have been so evident. In fact, faced with Sirajuddaula's initial attack, the Company servants (i.e. employees) stationed in Calcutta proved so irresolute and incompetent in their military defense that a victory on the scale of Clive's only twelve months later must have seemed unimaginable.

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[3] First quote from Samuel Charles Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757; a selection of public and private papers dealing with the affairs of the British in Bengal during the reign of Siraj-uddaula.* (London: J. Murray, 1905), lii. Second from Robert Orme, *A history of the military transactions of the British Nation in Indostan, from the year MDCCXLV. To which is prefixed a dissertation on the establishments made by Mahomedan conquerors in Indostan.* (London: Printed for J. Nourse, 1763), II, 28

[4] First quote from Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 77. Second from Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 58

[5] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, ccxii. Here, Hill complains that Bengalis in the early twentieth century were shockingly unwilling to "appreciate anything like the full value [of] the benefit they received by the liberation of this country from the tyranny of Siraj-uddaula".

[6] G. B. Malleson writes of Sirajuddaula: "He was rather weak than vicious…had been petted and spoilt by/his grandfather, had had but little education…Without experience and without stability of character…what wonder that he should have inaugurated his accession by acts of folly?" G Malleson, *The decisive battles of India : from 1746 to 1849 inclusive* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2007), 42-3.

Sirajuddaula, convinced that only open war could repair the damage done to his sovereignty by the Company's initial refusal to acknowledge his succession, set out from his capital at Murshidabad in late May, marching his army under the curious gazes of the merchants whose ships choked the Hugli River in the thousands, reducing any English settlement on the road to the Company's headquarters in Calcutta. Servants ensconced there in the crumbling walls of the long-neglected Fort William scrambled to defend their walls, but their efforts at resistance "combined farce with tragedy".[7] After only two days of shelling, the great majority of men in the fort, including most of their officers, abandoned Calcutta entirely in a disorderly mass desertion so strikingly against contemporary conceptions of military honor that French letters would refer to the event as a "*Mystery of Iniquity*".[8] Those men unlucky enough to remain in the fort took their revenge at their abandonment by smashing through the quarters of the escaped officers and drinking so much of their alcohol that most were too drunk to stand when the siege began the next morning.[9] Though the few remaining officers threatened these disobedient troops at gunpoint, few would take up their posts on the ramparts.[10] Standing within the inner walls of Fort William, less than a month after leaving Murshidabad, Sirajuddaula was understandably confident in his military abilities, boasting within reason to the Dutch VOC that "I find myself able to exterminate ten such nations as these English".[11]

The striking contrast between this ignominious defeat in 1756 and the victory

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[7] Lawrence. James, *Raj: the making and unmaking of British India* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 32.

[8] Letter from French settlement at Chandernaggar. 03 July 1756. Translated in Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 49.

[9] Watts and Collet to the Court of Directors, 16 July 1756. National Archives of India., Bengal (India), and East India Company., *Fort William-India House correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto, v.1,* ed. K. K. Datta (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1958), 1016.

[10] Watts and Collet to the Court of Directors, 16 July 1756. Ibid..

[11] See Hugli Consultations. 25 June 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 26.

secured only a year later eighty miles away at Plassey could not be more emphatic. What accounts for this vast divergence? Why were Clive's soldiers, imported into Bengal from the Company's southerly holdings in Madras (modern-day Chennai), so much more capable than those controlled by Roger Drake, the president of Fort William? In part, one should acknowledge that Clive's easy success in 1757 was not solely a military victory, but was predicated more directly on the advantages he gained from a political conspiracy he had stirred up within the Nawab's *darbar* (court).[12] Nevertheless, even admitting the importance of this plot against the Nawab, Clive's military was inarguably a substantially superior entity than its counterpart in Calcutta. At Plassey, he stood with three thousand trained and disciplined soldiers, while Drake a year before had only been able to cobble together five hundred, with half that number of rusty muskets to go around.[13] This discrepancy plainly suggests that the institution supporting Clive, those Company settlements from Madras, was a much more militarized body than was Drake's administration in Bengal.

Despite this marked contrast, few scholars have sought specifically to analyze the causes for this divergence. Often, the defeat of Fort William appears in historical narratives only as a source of motivation and of opportunity for Clive's campaign in the next year, without concentrating on the causes of that initial defeat.[14] Historians focused more specifically on the siege itself have tended to explain the failure of the Company's military in 1756 as the result of incompetence on the part of Drake and his advisors,

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[12] A detailed discussion of this conspiracy and the role Clive played in bringing it into being can be found in Sushil Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire : Plassey revolution of 1757* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2000)

[13] James, *Raj*, 32.

[14] Geoffrey Parker, for instance, in discussing the militarization of the Company, devotes only one line to the siege: referring to Clive's invasion of Bengal, he writes "[a]dmittedly the new Nawab of Bengal had given provocation by taking Bengal". Geoffrey Parker, *The military revolution : military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500 - 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1996), 135

dramatically highlighted by Clive's genius in 1757. S. C. Hill, writing in 1905, in particular contrasts the "behavior of the Council of Fort William…vacillating and uncertain" and that of Madras, which, "as brave men always will, drew inspiration from the disaster which had befallen their country".[15] In this thesis, I will argue that the gap between Clive and Drake's military forces extended far beyond such supposed idiosyncrasies. Instead, I posit that they emerged as a result of long-term differences in the historical experience of Company servants stationed in Bengal and those stationed in Madras.

At its most basic, the divergence between the Company's army in Bengal and in Madras suggests that the corporation was not an entirely unified entity in the eighteenth century. Historians have long noted that the sheer distances involved in the Company's trade allowed servants in South Asia considerable flexibility in interpreting their directives from London, some arguing that this autonomy permitted militaristic servants to extend their imperial objectives far beyond the Court of Directors' intentions.[16] This dichotomy between servants on the ground and Directors on Leadenhall Street, though, was not the only divide in the Company's administration. A second, less commonly noted level existed in the internal structure of the Company's South Asian presence, separated into three independent administrative presidencies centered in Bengal (Calcutta), Madras, and Bombay. Theoretically, these hubs were to work in constant cooperation and communication, but the vagaries of distance expounded by the vast regional diversity of South Asia complicated any practical realization of this ideal. In the early eighteenth century, as the Mughal Empire's central control of South Asia declined and the

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[15] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, cxxv.
[16] K Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 55, 115.

subcontinent's geopolitical landscape was refocused around regional authorities, the daily experiences and concerns of each of these presidencies grew increasingly incongruous.

Douglas Peers has shown that "the nature and extent of the sovereignty of each presidency" played a significant role in determining how the Company's late-eighteenth-century wars were conducted, each presidency determining its own tactics and strategies in response to the regional reality in which its battles would take place.[17] In this thesis, I will argue that the gap between the presidencies was even wider at mid-century, defining not only *how* the presidencies set about accomplishing their goals, but also shaping the basic features of those objectives. Specifically, I will analyze one manifestation of this divergence, the relative militarization of the Bengal and Madras presidencies, in an attempt to gain insight into the way regional political realities in South Asia affected Company servants as they struggled to define their own identity within the subcontinent. My investigation will focus chronologically on the period from 1746, when the French Compagnie's attack on the Madras Presidency spurred it towards a more militarized outlook, to 1756, when the siege of Fort William dramatically changed both presidencies' administrative make-up. I seek to show both that the Madras Presidency's decision to militarize did not emerge internally, but rather in participation with regional political leaders and that the Bengal Presidency's equally active decision to refrain from this militarization was in turn a response to its position in the Bengal state.

Most simply, the Madras Presidency, hugging South Asia's southeastern coast in the Karnatik within the wider province of the Deccan, resided in a geopolitical context that was better suited to militarization than that of Bengal. The fabric of the Karnatik was

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[17] Douglas Peers, "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India" (Master's Thesis, University of Calgary, 1984), 50.

dotted with many small polities engaged in periodic conflicts as they sought to solidify

their claims to sovereignty beneath the relatively weak control of the Deccan's Nizams,

the regional rulers who attempted to control the province from Hyderabad.[18] Having

witnessed the French and English corporations' nascent military capabilities in the First

Carnatic War (1746-1748), between the English in Madras and the French Compagnie des

Indes at Pondicherry, many of these local kingdoms were eager to include these forces in

their networks of potential allies and mercenaries. Company servants, struggling to recoup

commercial losses sustained in that war, were similarly enthusiastic about the possibility

of supplementing their profits through these activities. At first simply a provider of such

mercenary support, the Madras Presidency became increasingly entangled and involved in

the politico-military fabric of the Deccan as these "country" wars continued and the

Company sought to negotiate for more secure and greater levels of compensation for its

participation.

These engagements catalyzed a shift in the Madras Presidency's institutional

ideology. The need for a more militarily oriented administration opened the door for

militaristic elements within the presidency, including Robert Clive, to gain influence.

Under their control the Company's army in the Karnatik underwent explosive

expansionist development. In 1746, facing an attack by the French Compagnie, the

Madras military had proven as incapable as the men of Fort William would be in 1756.[19]

The experiences and pressures of the Carnatic Wars, though, inspired massive reforms, the

men of Madras working both to import innovations of European warfare and to adapt

those tactics to South Asia to form what Kaushik Roy calls a "Balanced Military

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[18] P Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," in *The Oxford history of the British Empire.*, ed. Alaine Low (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 496.
[19] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 76.

Synthesis", a military model that would combine European and South Asian warfare into an ideal for the subcontinent.[20] Many local states in the Deccan joined and paralleled the Company in its quest for this synthesis, seeking their own reforms to respond to and to incorporate in the new tactics and strategies emerging on the Deccan's battlefields. By the mid-eighteenth century, these mutual developments had resulted in a fierce arms race in which no power, European or South Asian, could achieve singular military dominance in the Deccan.

Many historians depict the Company's militarization in the eighteenth century in what Hendrik Spruyt would characterize as a "unilinear evolutionary process", tracing its growth from politicized commercialism to active imperialism in a way that, as Spruyt has written of another context, "neglect[s] the multiplicity of institutional alternatives that were available during this historical change".[21] In these narratives, the decentralization of the Mughal Empire in the early eighteenth century provided an opening for militaristic elements in the Company to push forth their latent dreams of empire.[22] Certainly, the rapid changes of eighteenth-century South Asia would affect how servants did business in South Asia, but militarization was not the only form of interaction conceivable. In the Bengal Presidency, Company servants were determinedly engaged in creating one of these alternatives, eschewing militarization in favor of a newly politicized and active role in the state's civil administration.

In Bengal, Company servants traded in a context in which a strong central state

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[20] Kaushik Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia: Armies, Warfare, and Indian Society, c. 1740-1849," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 3 (July 2005): 659.

[21] Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors : an analysis of systems change* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4, 11. Spruyt in this book presents an extremely well-reasoned analysis of the weaknesses of this "unilinear evolutionary process" in the context of historical narratives tracing the decline of the feudal state and the rise of the modern state.

[22] An example of such a unilinear narrative can be found in Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, esp. chapter 6.

had put paid to most of the sort of local conflicts that had played host to the Madras Presidency's first interventions. More importantly, the province's vibrant economy, flourishing in the early eighteenth century under strong state support, made the Bengal Presidency's traditional methods of trade so profitable that costly proposals of militarization would have seemed impractical at best.[23] Alivardi Khan's deep suspicion of European arms further ensured that military development like that undertaken by the Madras Presidency would have been both unnecessary *and* actively risky. Thus, in lieu of building up a material force capable of challenging the existing state, as was the ambition of an increasingly influential faction in Madras, Fort William in the mid-eighteenth century sought instead to gain political power within the Nawabs' state structure. The presidency became an active participant in the civil administration of Bengal at the local level, collecting taxes and providing a judicial authority that extended Murshidabad's governing power into Calcutta.[24] I will further argue that even the Company's immediate disobedience of Sirajuddaula in the spring of 1756 can be understood as an attempt to gain power within that governmental structure, rather than as an outright rejection of its validity. Company servants' actions as political and commercial agents within the Bengal state comprised a dynamic and viable alternative to the militarization of Madras throughout the period under investigation and should be analyzed as an active model, rather than an atavistic holdover quickly losing ground to a more militaristic and imperial stance.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, that model of political/commercial interaction was an ephemeral one. The Bengal Presidency's power grab in 1756 proved a deep

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[23] Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700-1740," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 (August 1970): 804.

[24] The bulk of my information on the Company's participation in this government comes from William Tooke's account of the siege. 04 Oct to 11 Oct. 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 266-68

miscalculation, and the influence they had gained within the state's economy and civil administration provided little in the way of defensive support against Sirajuddaula's army. That egregious error, and the rapid military defeat that followed in its wake, effectively eliminated the Bengal Presidency's business model as a possible method for Company organization, its proponents fleeing for their lives into the comparative sanctuary of Bengal's coastal swamps. When they would finally reemerge from those muddy marshes and reenter Bengal's trade networks, they would do so under Clive's direction, having ceded their commercial interests to his imperial ambitions. The rapidity with which the Bengal Presidency's non-militarization vanished from the Company's operational modes and the apparent totality of the Madras Presidency's usurpation thereof would seem to render that commercial model a mere historical curiosity, ultimately less important than the events of 1757. On the contrary, I argue that it was only in the context of the Bengal Presidency's long-term non-militarization that Clive's victory at Plassey was possible. The existence of these two divergent spheres meant that the Madras Presidency was able to develop its army in one region and then transport it to another, distant province, one essentially isolated from that period of reform.

The Madras Presidency, for all its ambitions, could not have achieved empire in the Karnatik in the mid-eighteenth century. Many military historians assume that the Company's early militarization gave the presidency a massive, immediate advantage over country powers, which are often considered to have been slow to recognize the need to counteract the Company's military developments. P. J. Marshall writes that the "the initial impact of the new European armies was devastating", arguing that country powers did not respond effectively to the innovations of European warfare until the last decades of the

eighteenth century.[25] Geoffrey Parker too postulates that cultural inertia in South Asian armies prevented them from addressing this new threat until "the eleventh hour", when their hasty attempts at reform could not catch the Company's headstart.[26] I will argue, though, that these explanations underestimate the level of innovation and reform that occurred among country armies in the Deccan immediately as they came into contact with Company armies in the Carnatic Wars and that many powers actively attempted to create their own version of the Balanced Military Synthesis parallel to, or even outpacing, the Madras Presidency's quest. The enthusiasm with which that presidency prepared Clive's mission to Bengal in late 1756, then, was in part a result of their high hopes for that expedition: Clive would be able to extricate his command from that unwinnable arms race to invade a previously isolated region with "such an Army that has never before appear'd in that Country".[27] In that new context, the years of military experience and reform that Clive and his men had acquired in the Karnatik proved extraordinarily advantageous, paving the way for his victory at Plassey.

This interpretation of Clive's campaign focuses on a level of interaction in the English Company rarely subjected to explicit analysis. Many historians have suggested that the Company's imperial project was fundamentally shaped by the actions of servants in South Asia, at times in direct conflict to the desires of their employers. This argument is reminiscent of John Gallagher and Robert Robinson's peripheral theory of imperialism, formally intended to explain mid-Victorian imperial conquests as a function of agents on

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[25] Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 499.
[26] Parker, *The military revolution* , 135.
[27] Letter to the Nawab of Purnea from the Mil Dept. 13 Oct 1756. *Diary and Consultation Book, Military Department 1756*, Records of Fort St. George (Madras : Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, c1910-), 332.

the ground.[28] However, while such imperially driven servants certainly existed in South

Asia in this period, this model becomes problematic when one notes that that the core of

the Company's eventual empire emerged not around this burgeoning militarism (centered

at Madras), but rather in the province once home to its least imperialistic servants (in

Bengal). My thesis will argue that this apparent paradox can be explained by examining

the way in which Company servants interacted with their respective regional

environments and the opportunities found by the most ambitious of their number to

exploit those divergent interactions for their own ends. Only the ability of men such as

Clive to move between regions in South Asia made those initial conquests a possibility,

allowing military forces developed in one region to be levied against another. This

suggests that Gallagher and Robinson's theory as traditionally conceived omits a level of

interaction that in the eighteenth century was a major factor in bringing the imperial

project into being: those interactions occurring between servants stationed at various

peripheries independent of their relations with the metropole. Clive's brand of imperialism

was not simply a peripherally driven one, but rather one shaped by interperipheral

movement.

      The subtitle of this thesis, "How Two Indias Created One Empire", is not meant to

suggest that South Asians should somehow be blamed for the coming of the British Raj. It

is intended rather to draw the reader's attention to the role South Asia's regional diversity

had in the English East India Company's development in the early eighteenth century.

South Asian scholarship in recent decades has done much to reawaken appreciation for the

vibrancy of the subcontinent's political fabric, but few attempts have been made to tie the

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[28] Anthony Webster, *The debate on the rise of the British empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 76, 83.

history of that regionalization to histories of the Company's initial militarization. By breaking away from the dated convention of a uniform "India" and a uniform Company forcing its trade upon that undifferentiated locality, one can see an often overlooked dynamism in the interactions of Company servants with their specific regional institutions, both economic and political. I argue that it is only by contextualizing the three presidencies within these diverging local realities that one can understand their decisions and the results those had on South Asian history in general. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate that the military experiences of the Madras and Bengal presidencies in the mid-eighteenth century were fundamentally a function of those regional contexts and that, more significantly, it was those discrepancies and the ability of ambitious servants to exploit them, far more than any supposed innate superiority of European military innovation, that allowed the Company its first steps to empire. The army that conquered Bengal in 1757, for all that it flew the flag of an English corporation, was not a European force so much as it was a Karnatik one.

CHAPTER ONE
The Emergence of Multiple Indias

Introduction

A bell rang out through the expansive gardens of Earl's Court in London,

informing the spectators milling through Imre Kiralfy's truly spectacular 1895 exhibition

India! that his most recent musical was about to begin.[1] The audience had been wiling

away the hours before the play steeped in Kiralfy's image of pseudo-India, eating at an

"authentic" curry house (or observing it from the safety of the London pub on the other

side of the path), filing under a reproduced copy of the famous Maidan Gate of Delhi, and

even ogling at the two hundred Indians "imported" to Britain specifically for the event. In

the massive six-thousand-seat theatre specifically created for *India!*, Kiralfy intended to

depict for his visitors the history of India. The sheer expense and ostentation involved in

the production, involving a steamboat, live bonfires, and an orchestra hidden in the eaves

of the theater to make room for a water tank in the usual pit, make Kiralfy's musical a

memorable one, but its actual content was hardly ground-breaking. His narrative, cribbed

almost entirely from Monstuart Elphinstone's *History of India,* was a neat description of

luckless Hindu peoples suffering under the oppressions of Mughal and Brahman

overlords, struggling with fluctuating success against this abuse as they wait for a "more

gentle and beneficent power" to save them from their chains.[2] The final scene celebrated

that "liberation" with a parade of Britain's imperial heroes, led by Robert Clive, the victor

of the Battle of Plassey, marching out in full Roman regalia while India's "Guiding

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[1] This sentence and the following description of the *India!* exhibition and musical comes from Jacqueline S. Bratton, "Staging British India," in *Acts of supremacy : the British Empire and the stage, 1790-1930*, ed. Jacqueline S. Bratton, Studies in imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), esp 152-175
[2] Kiralfy quoted in Ibid., 168.

Spirits" sang "Joy, oh joy! Our task is done,/India's happiness is won!"[3]

Of course, Kiralfy's musical was in no sense an earnest attempt to narrate South Asia's history, but rather an effort to provide his audience with a justification for the existing British Empire. One hundred and fifty years before the exhibit, when news of the English East India Company's first territorial conquests first reached Britain, the concept of the Company's empire sat uneasily with many Britons. According to Linda Colley, their nascent national identity made much of the apparent juxtaposition between Britain's empire-through-trade and Iberian empires-through-conquest.[4] The Company's new holdings, which by the 1760s were substantially larger and more populous than Britain itself, seemed to some an unwelcome shift away from its former maritime "Creature of Liberty".[5] Even in the face of these doubts, though, many were eager to exploit this new empire, its massive revenue, and the significant material advantages they provided against the ever-present French foe. By 1773, official approval of the Company's empire was secure, demonstrated dramatically when a Parliamentary inquiry called to castigate Robert Clive for his actions in South Asia concluded with a resolution thanking him for his "great and meritorious services to this country".[6] As this acceptance spread throughout Britain, scholars, politicians, and artists strove to whitewash the concept of territorial empire, once so distrusted by the public, into a praiseworthy institution of liberation. Kiralfy's fin-de-siècle musical represented an extension and inheritance of that project.

This propaganda required two historical images: that of an India that needed saving and that of an English Company justified in effecting that liberation. Kiralfy's

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[3] Kiralfy quoted in Ibid., 169.
[4] Linda Colley, *Britons : forging the nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 101-2.
[5] Marquis of Halifax quoted in David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.
[6] Alexander Wedderburn in William Cobbett et al., *The parliamentary history of England, from the earliest period to the year 1803* (Pr. by T.C. Hansard for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1820), 882.

depiction of South Asian history attempted to fulfill both at once, casting the Mughals as a quintessentially evil empire, oppressing its subjects and limiting the Company's access to trade. He was not alone in this view. S. C. Hill, whose 1905 magnum opus on Bengal during Clive's campaigns is still one of the most widely read works on the subject, wrote that the Company's 1757 conquest of that province occurred just as the Hindus, a "subject race" "apathetic to all affairs of State and government", were finally mobilizing themselves against their Muslim (Mughal) overlords.[7] This lens renders Clive, not a usurper, but a laudable supporter of the underdog. Yet, if such a justification was "easy", its unmitigated vilification of the Mughal Empire was problematic, especially for Britons acting in South Asia in the early nineteenth century. As recent scholarship has shown, the administrators of British India, particularly in the period of Company rule, borrowed much of their legitimacy as political actors from ceremonies lifted straight from Mughal tradition and from the coerced approval of the captive shell of the Mughal court active in Delhi until 1857.[8]

The tension that emerged from these two ideological constructions, that of the Mughals as oppressors and that of the Mughals as legitimate political authorities, led other scholars to seek alternate justifications for the British Raj. One of the most pervasive theories described the Company not as having liberated South Asia from Mughal despotism, but as having restored the prosperity of that empire to a land wracked by war

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[7] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, xxii. Hill's introduction remains in wide circulation due to the seminal collection of primary sources it precedes.

[8] For a brief discussion of the use of Mughal authority in British rule, see C Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 16. Interestingly, Robert Travers, while accepting the importance of Mughal custom to British rule, has further shown that some British imperialists, perhaps motivated by stereotypes of Mughal despotism, sought to refocus imperial legitimacy on a supposed Hindu "ancient constitution". See Robert Travers, *Ideology and empire in eighteenth-century India the British in Bengal*, Cambridge studies in Indian history and society, 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), esp 26

and anarchy. This model suggested that the Mughal Empire had collapsed entirely in the succession wars that followed the death of the emperor Aurangzeb in1707, plunging the subcontinent into a so-called "Dark Century".[9] Harriet Martineau's 1857 *British Rule in India* provides a clear summary of the basics of this myth:

> [W]ith [Aurangzeb's death] the empire of the Moguls may be said to have passed away. Crimes of violence and treachery had been frequent before; now they occurred at the Court of Delhi and its dependencies in an unintermitting series…it was a leading feature of the life of the British in India that they were always surrounded by rulers and people who were at feud, and who desisted from mutual slaughter only to enter upon conflicts of deceit and treachery.[10]

To Martineau and to others following this tradition, the English Company's transformation from commercial to imperial power was a desperate gambit made to protect its own trade interests from the rampaging warlords of the almost post-apocalyptic chaos of eighteenth-century India.

The myth of the Dark Century would prove compelling even into the twentieth century, drawing on what appeared to be at least a superficially sound historical basis. Inarguably, the power of the Mughal imperial court diminished rapidly in the early eighteenth century, and, by 1739, the imperial court at Delhi could not even muster up enough practical power to protect its own city from a bloody Afghan raid. Mughal chroniclers, part of that fading court, provided fodder for the myth with their own words, describing the century as one of *inqilab*, a Persian word denoting revolution, a world turned upside down.[11] The myth persisted through the first wave of revisionism against the British imperial narrative, appearing almost unchanged in the writings of some nationalist Indian historians. In the 1960s, Irfan Habib, a member of the Marxist Aligarh

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[9] M Athar Ali, "Recent Theories of Eighteenth-Century India," in *The eighteenth century in Indian history : evolution or revolution?*, ed. P. J. Marshall (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 90.

[10] Harriet Martineau, *British rule in India* (Smith, Elder and co., 1857), 61-2.

[11] P Marshall, *The eighteenth century in Indian history : evolution or revolution?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

school of South Asian historiography, described the eighteenth century as a period of "reckless rapine, anarchy, and foreign conquest", with the last phenomenon exploiting the opportunities offered by the first two.[12] Habib's interpretation of the first half of the century is almost a wholesale repetition of the imperial history of Monstuart Elphinstone, who wrote that "territorial possessions" of the European companies in South Asia were won "by interfering in the lawless conflicts that arose out of the decadence of the Mogul Empire".[13]

Scholars in recent decades have begun to deconstruct this long-lived myth. The concept of a disorderly Dark Century has been shown to be an invalid and essentially useless analytical tool. If the view from Delhi seemed to be one of *inqilab*, historians focusing more locally on specific villages and regions have discovered historical experiences starkly divergent from that unfurling in the imperial center. Some areas in South Asia appeared even to have enjoyed sustained economic growth and development throughout the supposed era of decline.[14] This work has given rise to a new interpretation of the period, in which Delhi's loss of power led not to rampant anarchy, but instead to a proliferation in regional political authority and vibrancy wherein Mughal provincial administrators, as well as rulers emerging outside of that structure, turned away from the center and took upon themselves the duties and prestige of the state.[15] The result, far from a "Dark Century", was a veritable kaleidoscope of increasingly independent and disconnected, but internally vibrant polities.

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[12] Quoted in Om Prakash, "Trade and Politics in Eighteenth-century Bengal," in *The eighteenth century in India*, ed. Seema Alavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 137

[13] Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The history of India* (J. Murray, 1889), 75.

[14] C Bayly, "Epilogue to the Indian Edition," in *The eighteenth century in India*, ed. Seema Alavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 189.

[15] Much new work exists on this subject, but a particularly good introduction can be found in chapter VI of Andrea Hintze's book *The Mughal Empire and its Decline*, entitled "The Regionalization of Power in the Eighteenth Century", pp 103-138, esp. 129.

For imperial scholars, these revisions would hardly have shifted how they viewed the English Company itself, imagined to occupy a sort of unaffected island of Britishness acting upon, but never as part of, an Indian subcontinent. Many modern scholars, though, have challenged that long-held assumption of separation. C. A. Bayly's work on South Asian society has been particularly influential in emphasizing that the Company could not simply unilaterally exert its will on a subjected nation, but rather throughout its rule was compelled to interact and to engage with South Asians. Rather than the untouchable bubble Martineau describes, with the Company suffering the vagaries of Indian history until it could rise to conquer it, the Company today has been reconfigured as part of the subcontinent's historical experience, at least somewhat shaped by the same pressures and trends that influenced all South Asian political actors. This marginal integration became significant in the eighteenth century, as political power flowed increasingly out of the Mughal center into the peripheries: the Company actively imitated this fragmentation as its regional administrative presidencies began to forge paths independent from each other, in order to better connect to their local realities. By mid-century, this process had ensured that the "English Company trading into the East Indies" was, for all extents and purposes, *three* companies trading into, interacting with, and ultimately being shaped and directed by three different "Indias" therein.

Pictures of Delhi at Dusk

Few empires have been able to boast such stunning pedigree as the Mughal Empire. Babur, who founded it in 1526 with his indomitable Central Eurasian army, counted among his ancestors both Chinggis Khan and Temur.[16] His descendants did not

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[16] Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road : a history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 210.

shy from this legacy, and Aurangzeb's campaigns in the south of India at the close of the

seventeenth century brought the Mughals to their peak expansion, giving them nominal

control over a fifth of the world's population.[17] This unity, though, was an anomaly in the

historically fragmented world of South Asia, and, even as Aurangzeb reached this apex,

its practical political power over those holdings began to falter and to contract. Though a

Mughal emperor would hold court in Delhi until the Indian Rebellion of 1857, his

practical power already by the 1750s barely extended into his backyard.[18] The decades

between Aurangzeb's death and the rise of Company rule at the end of the eighteenth

century are some of the most contentious in South Asian history. It seems each new

generation of scholars has infused the era with the normative political concerns of its own

contemporary world, and, even today, the historiographical debate remains deeply

ensnared in the conflict between Indian nationalist and imperial apologist rhetoric.[19] The

full extent of this controversy, and the myriad schools it has produced, lies far outside the

scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this chapter will summarize some of the most influential

theories surrounding this period of Mughal imperial contraction.

Today's emphasis on the regional vibrancy of this era emerged with the

historiography primarily as a result of a radical shift in the way that scholars of South Asia

conducted their research. For generations, most chronicles of eighteenth-century South

Asia were essentially "Great Man" histories, narratives following the lives of a few

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[17] Andrea Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline : an interpretation of the sources of social power* (Brookfield Vt.: Ashgate, 1997), 9.

[18] John L. Esposito, ed., "Mughal Empire," in *The Islamic World Past and Present*, Oxford Islamic Studies Online <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t243/e231> (accessed 09 Nov 2009).

[19] Subrahmanyam and Alam must contend with this dialogue in their reader on the subject. After presenting their view of regional vibrancy, they assure their readers that "in the context of discussions among Indian historians, it is often claimed that a denial of the thesis of eighteenth-century anarchy and decline is tantamount to an apology for the British Empire. Our contention is precisely the reverse" "Introduction," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 70.

personalities exercising disproportionate power at the top levels of government and society. British imperial historians, seeking simultaneously to glorify the Mughal legacy and to demonstrate the totality of its collapse, unabashedly cast the emperors "Akbar and Aurangzeb [as] the hero and the villain respectively of the Mughal period".[20] Akbar (the third Mughal emperor, r. 1556 to 1605) was the genius behind the empire's first great expansion as well as the founder of many of the political institutions around which many South Asian governments would organize themselves for centuries to come. Those scholars working within the ideological confines of the British Raj, though, were most interested in Akbar's apparent rejection of orthodox Islam in favor of a relatively tolerant stance towards religious diversity throughout his growing realm.[21]

Accordingly, the supposed "villainy" of Aurangzeb's government (r. 1658-1707) stemmed from his refusal to continue this religious syncretism.[22] In more recent biographies, historians have questioned how complete this break with tolerance in fact was. Certainly, Aurangzeb was a deeply religious man, and that faith shaped his rule. He attempted to enforce the *sharia* upon his Muslim subjects, and, despite protests from his theologians, he reinstated the traditional property tax levied against non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.[23] He was equally committed to ensuring that his subjects could pursue Islam without obstruction. When he learned that the English Company was bombarding Mughal ships filled with pilgrims making the Hajj, he ordered an attack against the Company's headquarters in Bombay with some twenty thousand of his troops, forcing the English out of South Asia and revoking their rights to trade within his realm for a decade

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[20] Ibid., 19.
[21] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 146. Beyond simple non-persecution, Akbar actually opened the doors of government service to non-Muslims (Hintze 51-2).
[22] Ibid.
[23] Vinay Lal, "Aurangzeb," *Manas: History and Politics*, http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/ History/Mughals/Aurang2.html.

as punishment for these disruptions.[24] Yet, according to M. Athar Ali's examination of

Aurangzeb's letters, there is no evidence that these instances of Muslim privilege and

protection comprised any determined and explicit effort to shift the Mughals' religious

policy towards mass conversion or intolerance.[25] Moreover, even if Aurangzeb had

intended such a sea change, most of his policies, such as the religious tax, were quickly

dismantled by his successors, thus making it doubtful that their brief existence can bear

the onus of responsibility for the regionalization of eighteenth-century South Asia.[26]

Even in narratives that cast Aurangzeb at his most "villainous", though, the

emperor was never held to be the sole cause of the Mughals' collapse. Great Man histories

set his supposed intolerance up as an initial flaw in Akbar's system exacerbated by later

developments, specifically the failure of the imperial family to produce any more "great

men". If Aurangzeb was the villain of the piece, at least he was a strong one: in these

histories, his death marked the end of capable leadership in Delhi. When Aurangzeb died

in 1707, his three sons battled determinedly for the throne, echoing the war their father

had fought to acquire Delhi for himself. As the conflict progressed, it disrupted and

immobilized much of the administrative and commercial infrastructures of Delhi and Agra

for more than a year, but still no clear victor rose from the fray.[27] Instead, Delhi went

through a swift series of emperors, each deposed or usurped in turn, until Muhammad

Shah's ascension in 1719 brought an end to the game of dynastic musical chairs for some

twenty years. Yet even Muhammad Shah found himself unable to return to the imperial

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[24] Bruce Lenman, "The East India Company and the Emperor Aurangzeb," *History Today* 37, no. 2 (February 1987): 29.

[25] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 148.

[26] Satish Chandra makes this argument in Ibid., 149

[27] Ashin Das Gupta, "Trade and Politics in Eighteenth-Century India," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 372; J. F. Richards, "The Formulation of Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 253.

court its erstwhile power. Already in 1763, Robert Orme, the official historian of the English Company, had dismissed him as an incompetent fop, writing in no uncertain terms that "this security [of his throne] only served to render him unworthy of it. Indolent, sensual, and irresolute, he voluntarily gave to his favourites as great a degree of power, as that which the ministers of the throne had lately possessed in defiance of the will of sovereigns".[28] If Aurangzeb represented the quintessential Oriental despot, capricious and irrational, his sons and successors were the paradigmatic Oriental princes, petty and hedonistic. Their sloth, according to these imperial histories, created a power vacuum waiting to be filled with legions of warlords and conspiracy.

Quite apart from the Orientalism rampant in this interpretation, the analysis suffers from the limitations inherent to any "Great Man" history, namely its inability to identify any sort of nuanced social change or, indeed, to describe any phenomena occurring outside of the purview of its protagonists. To fill in these gaps, historians in the twentieth century began to shift their focus to consider more broadly the Mughal Empire as a political institution. The most influential group to emerge among these revisionists was the Aligarh School, named for its founding university (the Aligarh Muslim University), which counted among its members such luminaries as M. Athar Ali and Irfan Habib. These scholars employed a Marxist-nationalist lens in their work, arguing that the empire itself, as a structure rather than as the expression of an individual's will, was "a despotic extractive mechanism which had very little connection to Indian 'society'".[29] Though this systemic perspective represented a break from older narratives, some historians criticize the school for retaining "many of the preoccupations and methodological preconceptions"

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[28] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, v1, 22.
[29] Jon Wilson, "Early Colonial India beyond Empire," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 4 (2007): 953. Note that Wilson is not part of this school, but only summarizing its viewpoint.

that had biased the older imperial histories.[30] Subrahmanyam and Alam argue that Aligarh

scholars still locate the mechanism for historical change within the emperors themselves,

leaving no other space for political agency.[31] While the Aligarh school set itself decidedly

against the imperialist histories that had gone before it, scholars in both traditions

articulate surprisingly similar explanations for the decline of the Mughal Empire,

emphasizing the totality of its decline as the result of weak emperors incapable of

controlling the Mughal state.

In the last few decades, this pervasive Dark Century model has, in Jon Wilson's

memorable phrase, "collapsed as dramatically as its proponents believed the Mughal

empire itself fell".[32] As new South Asian historians began to focus their analyses on the

village level, new evidence has called into question earlier assumptions about the depth

and efficacy of Mughal rule in these areas, leading scholars to reevaluate how severely

such societies would have been affected by a political collapse in the center.[33] Farhat

Hasan's insightful monograph, *State and locality in Mughal India: Power relations in

western India*, though recent, has already greatly influenced the way scholars understand

the power relations existing between the imperial court at Delhi and the local institutions

on the peripheries. Hasan analyzes socio-political movements in Surat during and

immediately after its conquest by the Mughals in the sixteenth century to show that the

relationship between the emperors and their subjects, once assumed to be purely despotic,

in fact followed "a processual dynamic whereby the actions of social actors constantly

impinged on the system, modifying, moulding and changing it", what he calls a "co-

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[30] See, for instance, Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 14.
[31] Ibid., 57.
[32] Wilson, "Early Colonial India beyond Empire," 954.
[33] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 111.

sharing [of] sovereignty" with local groups.[34] With such continuity in local power

structures, even during times of political upheaval, it is difficult to argue that disruptions

in Delhi would by necessity incur total political collapse in all regions throughout the

subcontinent.

Farhat Hasan's monograph joins a wider trend of recent work that emphasizes the

multiplicity and variety of political actors influential in South Asia during the Mughal

period. C. A. Bayly has been a particularly important voice in helping to reshape the

historiography of the late-Mughal Empire to include these new agents. Bayly's analysis of

the Mughal decentralization focuses on three major causal factors. Two of these are

external, the growth of European trade interests in South Asia and a supra-regional

political crisis holding sway in all Islamic empires, but the bulk of Bayly's investigations

have concentrated on elucidating the third and, to him, most important factor: the rise of a

politicized merchant class.[35] Hasan has shown that, at least in Surat, a mercantile middle

class had always played a significant role in granting the city's rulers legitimacy and

authority.[36] Bayly, though, contends that the very strength of the Mughal Empire helped

facilitate such massive economic growth that an unprecedented coalition of wealthy

traders and bankers arose and began to set their sights on more explicit involvement in

both regional and imperial politics.[37]

A particularly salient example of these newly active merchants can be found in

Bengal in the 1730s. There, the province's foremost banking family, titled the Jagat Seths,

or the "Bankers of the World", had both earned their position and began their political

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[34] Farhat Hasan, *State and locality in Mughal India : power relations in western India, c. 1572-1730* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31, 35.

[35] C Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

[36] Hasan, *State and locality in Mughal India* , 18.

[37] Bayly, "Epilogue to the Indian Edition," 166, 168-9.

empowerment by providing loans to the government and to Bengali tax-collectors.[38] In 1739, they expanded beyond this marginalized role to help fund a military nobleman, Alivardi Khan, in his bid to usurp the throne from the recently invested Nawab Sarfaraz Khan.[39] Robert Orme suggests that the Seths joined the plot to revenge their family honor, damaged by Sarfaraz Khan's demand to view one of their wives unveiled, but the commercial and diplomatic support they enjoyed throughout Alivardi's reign seem a more likely motivation than Orme's colorful anecdotes.[40] The alliance proved immensely profitable: by the end of Alivardi's life, the Jagat Seth wealth was so great that they reportedly employed *two thousand men* to guard their treasures.[41] Such political designs between a noble and a family of merchants took place outside of traditional Mughal networks, subverting the hierarchy between the emperor and his noblemen (the *mansabdari*). The wars of succession in Delhi both exacerbated the decline of those traditional interactions and emptied the imperial center of its commercial ties. The networks that emerged after this structural and geographic shift were thus founded not around the imperial seat, but in the new hubs of commerce among the wealthy merchants and their proximate regional political officials.

Rise of the Regions

The transfer of power from Delhi to the peripheries was not caused by Aurangzeb's death. Indeed, the process had begun long before 1707, in part as a function of the emperor's political priorities. Throughout the last decades of his life, Aurangzeb

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[38] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 118.
[39] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 31.
[40] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 30.
[41] J. H. Little, "The House of Jagat Seth," ed. Calcutta Historical Society, *Bengal, Past & Present* XXII (1922): 87. Note that this is the second section of a two-part feature of *Bengal, Past & Present.* The first part of the article was published as J. H. Little, "The House of Jagat Seth," ed. Calcutta Historical Society, *Bengal, Past & Present* XX (1920): 111-200

was almost exclusively focused on his designs to bring the Deccan, the wide plateau of

southern India, under Mughal control.[42] His military campaigns in this province ate up his

energies and the attentions of his court to such a degree that other regions were able to

negotiate increasing levels of local autonomy, the northeastern province of Bengal, for

instance, achieved almost total de facto independence by the turn of the eighteenth

century. This regionalization accelerated after his death, as Delhi's succession crises

limited the ability of the imperial center to enforce its rule over its peripheries, and, by

mid-century, the emperor's practical power to regulate South Asian politics had virtually

vanished. In turn, newly restructured and autonomous regional governments, often

referred to as "successor states", enjoyed a brief heyday of vibrancy in the interval

between the Mughal decline and the rise of the British Empire.[43] Varied and complex,

these states resist any generalization, but two basic organizational templates can be

discerned: first, states run by provincial Mughal officials maintaining the imperial

administrative structure and, second, states drawn together under a more "indigenous"

ruling elite, what Subrahmanyam and Alam dub "ethnic states".[44]

      Chronologically, Mughal-based successor states emerged as significant political

powers somewhat earlier than their "ethnic" counterparts. In fact, many of them were born

as a direct, if unintentional, result of Aurangzeb's own policies, especially as he struggled

to fulfill the massive revenue demands that plague any ruler bent on long-term warfare. In

the past, Mughal officials had served only briefly in their offices, viceroys and other

provincial administrators transferred across the subcontinent every few years to prevent

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[42] Andrea Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline : an interpretation of the sources of social power* (Brookfield Vt.: Ashgate, 1997), 167.
[43] Marshall, *The eighteenth century in Indian history* , 1.
[44] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 68.

the cultivation of local alliances independent of and against the central sovereign.[45] Under

Aurangzeb, this tradition began to erode, as some nobles managed to secure hereditary

rights in return for pledging continuous support for his costly campaigns.[46] Savvy regional

officials used this newfound security to win alliances with the local elite, thus securing

steadier and larger revenue streams that both solidified their power in the region and won

the support of Delhi.

One administrator particularly successful at keeping this diplomatic balance was

Murshid Quli Khan, the first essentially independent Nawab of Bengal (r. 1716-1727).

Sent to Bengal in 1700 to serve as the *Diwan*, or fiscal administrator, of the province,

Murshid Quli Khan used his political and financial acumen to bolster Bengal's

exponential economic growth, winning him the support of wealthy urban merchants—

precisely that social group Bayly has identified as central to the acquisition of regional

independence.[47] With this support, Murshid Quli Khan succeeded both as a revenue

collector and a ruler, increasing the taxes sent to Delhi over twenty percent in two

decades, bringing the historically autonomous rural *zamindari* (large landholders) under

an unprecedented level of control.[48] He was thus able to secure the very form of local

authority the Mughal Empire had once so actively discouraged while using their massive

tax payments to maintain Delhi's complete approval despite these alliances. In 1716, these

negotiations paid off when the emperor made him Nawab on top of his continued tenure

as Diwan, making him the uncontested head of Bengal's political *and* fiscal structure.

From this appointment would come the independent polity that would rule continuously

over Bengal until the British takeover after Clive's invasion in 1757.

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[45] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 78.
[46] Ibid., 95.
[47] Ibid., 193.
[48] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 193; Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 14-15.

Similar successor states following this process of negotiated autonomy emerged in Awadh and Golconda, and many scholars consider Nizam ul-Mulk's kingdom of Hyderabad in that same category. Indeed, this last state can claim distinction as the first *officially* independent state, openly breaking from Delhi in 1724, but Nizam ul-Mulk contended with powers and pressures dramatically different from those Murshid Quli Khan had encountered.[49] Hyderabad was located in the Deccan and thus had been the site of imperial focus throughout Aurangzeb's reign. Accordingly, its would-be independent officials did not enjoy the same opportunities to negotiate a break with Delhi as their counterparts discovered in more far-flung regions. In fact, Aurangzeb was deeply committed to bringing the Deccan more determinedly under central control.[50] Nizam ul-Mulk, fighting for independence in the midst of Delhi's succession crises could not benefit from the imperial approval Murshid Quli Khan's fiscal talents won in Bengal. Worse still for Nizam ul-Mulk, his ability to gather together strong local support was hampered by the ruin that Aurangzeb's warfare had visited on the region's agricultural economic base, destruction that in turn had fragmented and diminished much of the province's *zamindari* wealth.[51] Despite these challenges, a state in Hyderabad did form, but its relatively low support both from above *and* below ensured that its territorial claims and internal stability were somewhat rockier than in Bengal and Awadh.[52] Clearly, among the Mughal successor states, South Asian politics in the eighteenth century was a highly regionalized and variegated historical experience.

This diversity was furthered by the emergence of what Alam and Subrahmanyam

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[49] Marshall, *The eighteenth century in Indian history* , 5.
[50] Richards, "The Formulation of Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," 255-6.
[51] A. R. Kulkarni and M. A. Nayeem, eds., *History of the Modern Deccan* (Hyderabad: Abul Kalam Azad Oriental Research Institute, 2000), 5.
[52] Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 496.

call "ethnic states". Though the strongest incarnations of this template would reach their peak after the mid-century mark, their rise nevertheless played an important role in South Asia's political landscape and deserves brief consideration. Perhaps the most powerful of these polities were the Mysore kingdom, in the very south of India, and the Maratha Confederacy, in the southwest. These two states would be the most formidable rivals the English Company faced in its late-eighteenth-century conquests. Though these polities were not a part of existing Mughal institutions, their rulers sought, as the British would, to tie their local legitimacy to that imperial gloss of authority.[53] The Marathas usually depicted themselves as the allies and vassals of Delhi, despite later British attempts to characterize them as the Mughals' sworn enemies.[54] Only Tipu Sultan, the last king of Mysore, would seek to appropriate upon himself the glory of the emperor.[55] Yet, for all this ceremonial rhetoric, the ties to Delhi were barely surface deep, and the states developed a multiplicity of political identities and experiences distinct both from that imperial legacy and from each other. The Marathas placed their raiding warrior tradition into a newly structured state apparatus, and Mysore embarked on a highly successful technological and economic revolution, eventually producing complex manufactured wares such as watches and cannon.[56]

Imperial historians tended to ignore the vibrancy and strength of these states in favor of characterizing the post-Mughal political landscape as a world of warlords and usurpers.[57] Even today, successor states, especially those drawing on existing Mughal

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[53] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 201.
[54] Bratton, "Acts of supremacy ," 168.
[55] Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British Empire*, 16.
[56] For Mysore development, see Irfan Habib, "The Eighteenth Century in Indian Economic History," in *The eighteenth century in India*, ed. Seema Alavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 68.
[57] See, for instance, Elphinstone's treatment of Nizam ul-Mulk's "rebellion" against Delhi. Elphinstone, *The history of India*, 692-99

structures, are sometimes dismissed as mere fragments, the embers of a flame already

dead. Lawrence James refers to the polities as "lesser Mughals", a term semantically

casting the regional rulers as pale echoes of their imperial ancestors.[58] But these states

were not the unstable maelstroms of imperial imagination or the simple shadows that

James seems to envision: rather, they were often vibrant, stable, and diverse heirs of

Delhi's legacy. Bengal under the Nawabs experienced such economic vitality that

contemporary Persian historians dubbed it the "Paradise of Provinces".[59] More recent

work has suggested that Awadh, long assumed to have been a black hole of anarchy,

actually used that stereotype to prevent the Company from exploiting its real wealth.[60]

The validity and the meaning of contemporary cries that the century was a time of

inversion, of *inquilab*, were clearly a function of one's location.

To an observer taking stock of events from the imperial court at Delhi, the

eighteenth century truly was disastrous. In 1700, the city was the center of major world

power, but, in the short span of a generation, that grandeur would be stripped away

piecemeal until the capital was a shell of its former self. In 1739, Delhi's inhabitants saw a

terrible demonstration of that diminishment. The Afghan ruler Nader Shah invaded north

India, and the Mughal army found itself unable to check their march as they approached

the imperial city. The prince sacked Delhi in a tremendously bloody raid, his men leaving

thousands of civilians dead in their wake. To compound this injury with symbolic insult,

Nader Shah carted away the emperor's Peacock Throne, literally removing the Mughal

imperial seat of power.[61] For many, the event was proof positive that imperial claims to

practical power were empty bluffs, inducing some successor states to declare their

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[58] James, *Raj*, 9.
[59] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 18.
[60] Bayly, "Epilogue to the Indian Edition," 188.
[61] James, *Raj*, 8.

autonomy officially. In the wake of the 1739 raid, both Bengal and Hyderabad cut off the revenue streams that they had so long sent to the capital.[62]

Robert Orme provides a grisly example of how far this process of decentralization had unfurled by the middle of the century. In 1753, the English Company ally Muhammad Ali finally won his lengthy war against Chanda Sahib to become the Nawab of the Karnatik (a small province in the Deccan). Having captured his enemy, Muhammad Ali had Chanda Sahib decapitated and ordered his head prepared for presentation to the imperial court, as was Mughal tradition. The head was accordingly paraded throughout the province with much pomp and circumstance, demonstrations that did much to legitimize Muhammad Ali's claim to the throne among locals. Yet Orme cautions that "there is no reason to believe that it [the head] was ever carried out of the Carnatic".[63] Though the Nawab stood to gain from tapping into Mughal ceremonies, he saw no advantage in opening such diplomatic overtures with the emperor. Such examples suggest that the Mughal Empire gave way, not to chaos, but to a multiplicity of new states. The "India" unified and connected by the Mughals disappeared, replaced with a set of "Indias" more in line with the diverse autonomy that had characterized these localities throughout most of recorded history. These states, running the gamut from the vibrant to the tenuous, were relatively disconnected from each other and from the imperial center.[64] Two people at opposite ends of the subcontinent were separated not just by distance, but by increasingly divergent historical experiences.

The Company in the Mix

Few in South Asia would have been in the position to appreciate that

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[62] Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline* , 202.

[63] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, v I, p 245.

[64] Das Gupta, "Trade and Politics in Eighteenth-Century India," 382.

diversification. Wartime disruptions in Delhi and the decline of central Mughal power together had restructured many of the networks and institutions that had once stretched across the empire to conform to more regional needs. The English Company was thus somewhat unique as an entity that was simultaneously enmeshed in several of those divergent local realities through its three presidencies *and* unified as an institution by forces external to South Asia. In the same period that Company servants contended with these disjointed pressures, they also made the initial jump towards articulated imperial ambitions. That shift was not complete: the Company had never been an entirely apolitical institution, and it continued commercial trade even after having acquired territorial empire. Still, the mid-century change that saw the Company develop a land army and political ambitions was, in P. J. Marshall's words, "a spectacular one…a transformation that is hard to explain".[65] Gallons of ink have been spilled seeking such an explanation, but, curiously, few historians have sought to examine whether the contemporaneous decentralization of South Asian politics influenced these developments. In particular, I know of no work that explicitly examines how the divergent local experiences of the Company's three presidencies might have affected the way servants at each saw their own role in the first half of the eighteen century, when they first began to contend with multiple "Indias".[66]

This lacuna may exist in part because most historians of the Company tend to set their focus in the Company's later history, when its empire was a more formalized entity. The Company's conquest of South Asia is often considered part of Britain's "Second Empire", a conceptual category emerging after and to some extent in response to the loss

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[65] Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 491.

[66] I have found more investigations examining this line of inquiry in the latter half of the century. Douglas Peers examines the Company's military experience across Presidencies from a specifically geopolitical standpoint in "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India.".

of the American colonies that comprised much of the "First Empire".[67] Though much

debate exists regarding the nature and the utility of these labels, most scholars see the

Second Empire as a more actively exploitative entity against non-white colonies including

both the Raj and the late-Victorian "Scramble for Africa".[68] Yet the Company's initial

conquests in South Asia antedated the American War for Independence by a full twenty

years. If the Court of Directors in London proved somewhat hesitant to accept this turn to

empire, militant servants on the ground, especially in the Madras Presidency, had long

agitated for such a role. As early as 1751, servants in Madras had suggested to the Court

of Directors that "any European nation resolved to war on them [Mughal states], with a

tolerable force, may over-run their whole country".[69] To view British India purely as a

part of the nineteenth-century empire is to obscure the early origins of the Company's

ambitions and to hide any internal cause that might have led to this development.

It would be a further mistake to analyze the Company as a wholly British

corporation: from its inception, it was involved with and a participant in the South Asian

political experience. The importance of politics on the ground for Company servants is

reminiscent of the analytical lens developed by John Gallagher and Robert Robinson to

understand Britain's mid-Victorian imperial activity. Much of their argument examines

the "official mind" of imperialism and the significance of informal control, but "the vital

key" of their theory lies in the mechanism that they see as responsible for many of

Britain's shifts from informal empire to coercive conquest.[70] As Robinson writes, "[t]he

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[67] P Marshall, "Britain without America--A Second Empire?," in *The Oxford history of the British Empire.*, ed. Alaine Low (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 577.

[68] Ibid., 576.

[69] Letter to the Court of Directors. 06 Aug 1751. "East India Series 1," Correspondence on Indian affairs to the Secretary of State's Office., 1748, 15., IOR/H/93, British Library

[70] William Louis, "Introduction," in *Imperialism : the Robinson and Gallagher controversy* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 36-37.

transition was not normally activated by [European] interests…but by the breakdown of collaborative mechanisms in extra-European politics."[71] According to their model, British agents dealing on the periphery generally acquired imperial ambitions as they came into contact with localities hostile to British monopolization of trade. David Fieldhouse calls this the "peripheral theory" of imperial expansion, while Robinson himself prefers that the term "excentric".[72] Douglas Peers and C. A. Bayly in their examinations of the Company's late eighteenth-century operations, while they do not explicitly apply this model, both follow Gallagher and Robinson in arguing that of Company servants on the periphery proved more influential in furthering the Company's continued expansion than did the Directors at Leadenhall Street.[73] Such a focus on the situation "on the ground" in South Asia may be even more helpful in illuminating the Company's initial turn towards that imperial expansion.

One cannot, however, argue that the British Crown was entirely opposed to the ambitions of these servants on the ground. Peripheral servants were greatly dependent on both the Court of Directors and the British Crown in funding their first campaigns. The Directors sent soldiers, trained officers, and money to cover military expenses throughout the 1740s and 1750s, even encouraging the more reluctant Bengal Presidency in 1756 to bolster those defenses as "in the present situation of affairs it is absolutely necessary to have our military force as complete as possible".[74] At least ostensibly, this military was designed to meet the threat of the French Compagnie des Indes. To the same end, the

[71] Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," in *Imperialism : the Robinson and Gallagher controversy*, ed. William Louis (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 141.
[72] Ibid., 147-8.
[73] Webster, *The debate on the rise of the British empire*, 83.
[74] Letter from the Court of Directors to the Bengal Presidency. 11 Feb. 1756. National Archives of India., Bengal (India), and East India Company., *Fort William-India House correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto.*, ed. R. K. Perti (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1958), II, 162

British Crown sent a royal squadron to the Indian Ocean and, in 1752, a division of the

British Army proper under Colonel Adlercron to serve in Madras. In the 1740s, the

Directors took for granted that their military actions would meet with royal approval,

warning the Bengali Nawab Alivardi Khan in 1748 that George II "will support the

Company in whatever they think fit to do for their further Security".[75] Clearly, both

Whitehall and Leadenhall Street were willing, perhaps even eager, to develop a more

militarized form of trade, especially as a means to end French competition in South Asia.

These institutions, however, seem to have envisioned a militarized monopoly of

trade, rather than a territorial conquest of South Asia. The transformation of the Company

away from its erstwhile politicized commercial focus towards an actively *imperial* war-

footing does not seem to have been part of Britain's designs for the corporation. Indeed,

when Clive triumphed at Plassey in 1757, irrevocably launching the Company towards

political rule, he was not acting out any orders from London. His infamous directives to

keep "the Sword…hand in hand with the Pen" when negotiating with the Bengal state

emanated from the Madras Presidency, and the Directors in London learned of the plan

only after conquest was complete.[76] Hearing the news, many at Leadenhall Street balked

at what appeared to them a financially unsound, and morally ambiguous, policy change.[77]

The British government expressed similar reservations, and Parliament actually initiated

several inquiries against the founders of the Indian empire. Clive found himself in the

crosshairs of these accusations in 1772 and 1773, accused by his enemies in Parliament

that he "did…abuse the power with which he was intrusted, to the evil example of the

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[75] Quoted in James, *Raj*, 22. The veiled threat came during an argument about tax arrears.
[76] Letter from Fort St. George Council to Roger Drake, Governor of the Fort William Council, explaining the expedition's purpose. 13 Oct. 1756. Madras (India : Presidency), Diary and Consultation Book, Military Department (1756), Records of Fort St. George (Madras : Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, c1910-), 329.
[77] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 55-6.

servants of the public".[78] Though he emerged unscathed from the confrontation, neither

Clive nor the other "heroes" of the imperial project would enjoy in their lifetimes the sort

of unambiguous praise heaped upon them in the Kiralfy's nineteenth-century spectacle.

This tension and disapproval suggests a divergence had arisen between the imperial

ideologies of servants in the Madras Presidency and the sensibilities of the average Briton.

It seems only logical to suppose that this disparity, to some extent, must have been

born *outside* Britain, on the periphery, as those ambitious Company servants interacted

with the Mughal successor states. Indeed, the English Company seems to have been

uniquely, almost ideally, situated to feel the effects of the subcontinent's decentralization.

Early in the Company's history, servants had realized that, while European ships could

only reach Asian ports periodically, the best deals could be had by purchasing goods

continuously over the course of the year, rather than just during the shipping season.[79]

This fact of geography encouraged the corporation to acquire trading factories and,

eventually, forts in which those goods could be housed to await the seasonal fleets. By the

eighteenth century, these holdings had been organized into three administrative

presidencies: Bengal (with its headquarters in Calcutta), Bombay on the west coast, and

Madras in the southeastern Coromandel Coast. As K. N. Chaudhuri has shown, the long

communication lag between Britain and South Asia, often as much as eighteen months,

required that each administrative council held great autonomy and flexibility to negotiate

with local merchants and officials on the spot.[80]

The Directors hoped that corporate coherence could be maintained despite this

independence, but the yearly reports sent out of London in part to maintain this unity were

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[78] John Burgoyne in Cobbett et al., *The parliamentary history of England, from the earliest period to the year 1803*, 882.
[79] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, vII, 5.
[80] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 457.

rare, dated, and usually far removed from the actual situation on the ground. An extreme

example of this distortion plagued a letter from the Court of Directors dated 29 December

1756 to the Bengal Presidency. Here, the Directorate admonished that "we shall greatly

depend upon your care and prudence for the future safety of our valuable settlements in

Bengal".[81] Unbeknownst to them, this was a rather belated warning: those "valuable

settlements" had been captured some six months earlier by the Nawab Sirajuddaula. By

the time the letter actually reached South Asia, it had become even less relevant to the

situation at hand. In the months it took to make the passage from London to Bengal, Clive

had invaded from Madras and made the Company the de facto ruler of the entire province.

Even if Clive had wanted to follow the orders of the Court of Directors, the massive lag in

communication meant that few explicit directives could withstand the rapidly changing

realities of South Asia.

In the first generations of the Company's history, though, this lack of internal

centrality had been somewhat mitigated by the Mughal Empire itself, which had provided

a somewhat centralized trading network stretching across South Asia from which the

presidencies could take shared cues of action. From its first missions to South Asia, the

Company had sought to use this centralization to secure commercial advantages in their

local dealings, each presidency investing heavily in envoys such as Thomas Roe, who

worked for years in the court of the Emperor Jahangir to win imperial favors for all of the

Company's settlements. Yet, as Mughal power began to fragment, those commercial

networks too began to regionalize. In 1717, Emperor Farruhksiyar granted the Company a

wide-ranging *firman* (decree) that, at least in the Company's interpretation, granted

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[81] *FWIHC vII*, 171.

massive custom reductions throughout the empire.[82] Surat, where the Bombay Presidency

conducted much trade, respected the order, but in Bengal "Murshid Quli Khan chose to

interpret it in a sense much less liberal than that taken by the British".[83] K. N. Chaudhuri

writes that the servants of Calcutta were obliged to bribe local rulers to follow a legitimate

imperial mandate, but, here, his focus on European concerns somewhat distorts these

events.[84] We have already seen that Murshid Quli Khan's Bengal in 1717 was almost

entirely independent from Delhi: it is hardly surprising that an unwanted *firman* found

little traction in the court at Murshidabad.[85] As Orme wrote in hindsight, "the English

government confiding too much in the sanction of the Mogul's government, neglected the

more efficacious means of bribing the Nabob [of Bengal] to their own views".[86] Quickly,

this error was resolved, and negotiations with the emperor were replaced with embassies

focused on regional *darbars*, or courts.

Interperipheral Imperialism

According to imperial histories, Delhi's diminishing ability to oversee South Asian

trade resulted in a dawn of complete anarchy. This narrative portrays the Company's

militarization as a necessary defensive measure undertaken to make up for rapidly

emptying promises of imperial protection.[87] As we have seen, this model fails

fundamentally at the first step: the fall of the Mughal center was hardly the collapse of

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[82] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 8.
[83] Samuel Charles Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 1905, xxiv.
[84] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 124.
[85] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 15.
[86] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 24.
[87] Malleson writes that, in the early eighteenth century, English traders were utterly obedient to the local rulers, and "For defense against an enemy the native ruler had then, as the European overlord has now, to be trusted to." This model, Malleson said, only deteriorated when those local rulers proved themselves incapable of that defense. Malleson, *The decisive battles of India* , 3, 5Similarly, Macaulay wrote that the initial fortifications at Calcutta were designed "against the horsemen of Berar", "this wild clan of plunderers descended from the mountain" in the chaos that followed Aurangzeb's death. Thomas Macaulay, *Macaulay's essay on Lord Clive* (Boston: Leach Shewell & Sanborn, 1889), 27-8

South Asian order. Equally problematic is the observation that this militarization

supposedly undertaken in response to Aurangzeb's death did not occur until the 1740s,

some forty years after the event. Contrary to the expectations of imperialist

historiography, the decades between 1707 and 1746 were among the Company's most

profitable, dividends in London reaching a full twenty-two percent at their peak.[88] Far

from a desperate band of heroes barricading themselves against the specters of an

anarchical maelstrom, Company servants in the first half of the eighteenth century were

deeply engaged in the political fabric of South Asia, redeveloping and reevaluating their

own ethoi and identities in tandem with the solidifying successor states surrounding their

respective presidencies.

As internal trade routes in South Asia eroded, communication between the

presidencies dwindled to a rarity, exacerbating existing divergences across the

presidencies. Without easy overland routes, such letters could be difficult to send, Orme

writing that even the best ships might need a month to travel a mere hundred miles up the

coast against a headwind.[89] In the face of these constraints, the presidencies grew

increasingly disconnected from each other and increasingly enmeshed with their local

realities, and any collaborative spirit between them evaporated. In 1748, the Madras

Presidency had to chastise their Bengal counterpart for failing to send a single letter

between March and September of that year.[90] Isolated from contact with the Company's

wider structure for months or years at a time, the presidencies participated more directly in

their regional realities than in a theoretical coherent corporate identity. Bombay, faced

with a hinterland increasingly hostile to European trade, focused on developing a naval

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[88] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 460.
[89] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, vI, 92.
[90] Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings" (National Archives of India, 1748), 48.

port and shipyard rather than expeditions to the interior.[91] The Bengal Presidency began to integrate itself into the vibrant economic and political structures of the Nawabs' Bengal, becoming deeply involved in the administration of both structures. In southerly Madras, servants contended against major trade disruptions during the Carnatic Wars and, in response, began to seek out alternative profit sources, a quest that would provide the opening for militaristic men such as Clive to come to power in the Madras council.

By the 1750s, the extent to which the Madras Presidency had militarily outstripped its counterpart in Bengal was astonishing. A quick comparison between the two administrations' monthly expenditure lists provides an immediate demonstration of this stark contrast (see Table 1 below). In May 1755, the Madras Presidency reported that its military-related expenses had totaled to well over 17,000 pagodas (approximately 7,600 pounds), while its "charges merchandise", expenses specifically relating to its commercial activities, was allotted a mere sixty pagodas—about twenty-six pounds.[92] In contrast, in January of that same year, the servants of the Bengal Presidency splurged 6346 rupees (over six hundred pounds) on those same "charges merchandise", but spent a scant *133 rupees* (thirteen pounds) on their military forces.[93] Such inverted ratios were in no way unusual quantitative testimony to the divergent foci of the two presidencies. While the Bengal Presidency sought to connect itself more deeply into its local merchant community, the Madras Presidency sought South Asian involvement in a different sphere, expanding its army and engaging in massive mercenary and outright military ventures against both local and European foes.

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[91] Peers, "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India," 55.
[92] Madras (India : Presidency), "General Journals and Ledgers: Journal" (Madras, 1755), 8, 12-13., British Library.
[93] Minutes of the Fort William Council. 17 April 1755. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings" (National Archives of India, 1755), 157.

Table 1: Comparison of Military and Mercantile Expenses in the Madras and Bengal Presidencies (1755)

	Charges Military	Charges Merchandise	Charges Military as % of Total*
Bengal Presidency (Jan 1755)	£ 13	£ 6346	0.20%
Bengal Presidency (April 1755)	£ 14	£ 148	8.64%
Madras Presidency (May 1755)	£ 7600	£ 26	99.66%
Madras Presidency (June 1755)	£ 12 967	£ 455	96.61%

Information in table taken from Madras (India: Presidency, "General Journals and Ledgers: Journal" (Madras 1755), 8, 12-13, 16-22, 27-31 and Minutes of the Fort William Council. 17 April 1755 and 11 Aug 1755. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings" (National Archives of India, 1755), 157 and 318.

These men in Madras were precisely the sort of "men on the spot" responsible for formal imperial conquest in Gallagher and Robinson's model. In fact, they enjoyed even more freedom to act on these ambitions than did their nineteenth-century counterparts in light of the terrible communication lag between London and South Asia. K. N. Chaudhuri describes the resulting situation in the Deccan as "an ideal condition for intervention", wherein "[t]he weakness of local rulers, combined with a massive political ambition on the part of the English and the French".[94] Yet, if the Deccan was such an "ideal" region for the development of imperial desires, it seems deeply counterintuitive that the Company's first territorial conquests would occur, not in that southern plateau, but rather in Bengal in the wake of Clive's 1757 campaign. Why was political rule solidified there, in the purview of the most commercial presidencies, rather than in the Deccan, parts of which resisted the British until well into the nineteenth century? Neither the theories of Gallagher and Robinson nor those of K. N. Chaudhuri provide much in the way of explanation for this apparent paradox. To resolve it, one must remember that, despite

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[94] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 129.

phrases like men "on the spot", the periphery was hardly an undifferentiated entity. The local realities in which the Bengal and Madras servants participated were strikingly different from each other. Ambitious men in Madras would exploit these divergences, and their ability to move between them, to realize their imperial goals.

Gallagher and Robinson assume almost implicitly that imperial conquest of most regions lay within Britons' power. The mantra they envision for mid-Victorian imperialists runs "trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary", but, in the eighteenth century, what was "necessary" for control was often far more than what was feasible for a Company and a Crown just beginning to emerge as imperial powers.[95] If local politics had infused in Madras servants the desire to rule, the growth of these objectives did not instantly confer upon their proponents the resources needed to realize them. Instead, ambitious Company servants built up their military might and acumen over the course of decade of essentially continuous war in the Karnatik. As this fighting allowed the cultivation of a capable Company army, it simultaneously inspired a spate of military reforms throughout all powers in the Deccan, both European and South Asian, eventually resulting in the creation of a new form of highly effective, hybridized warfare in which no power was able to establish total dominance over the region.[96] For the English Company, an opening would come in 1756—as the Bengal Presidency was thrust suddenly into a war in its own province, leading its council to send desperate letters south begging for military aid. Madras responded, taking the opportunity to export their mature military into a province essentially cut off from the decade of reforms that had brought the army into being. These men, marching under Clive, made quick work of the

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[95] John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 13.
[96] For the emergence of this hybrid in South Asian armies, see Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British Empire*, 21

Nawab's forces, inexperienced against his tactics.

The conquest of Bengal was not catalyzed by "men on the spot", but rather men from a different spot. The existence of multiple "Indias" during the successor state period of South Asian history shattered the corporate coherence of the Company's presidencies, most starkly seen in the gap between Madras's increasing militarism and Bengal's heightened commercial trade. As Madras participated in the militarization of the south, its ambitions outstripped its abilities. The siege of Fort William and the resulting call for help from the Bengal Presidency in 1756, though, gave militant elements in the Company an unexpected opportunity to involve themselves in what was effectively another version of "India". By exporting their growing military capabilities from the heated warfare of the Karnatik to the less militarized environment of Bengal, they found advantages enough to achieve empire long before such conquests would have been possible in Madras. Gallagher and Robinson tend to assume a model of imperialism in which force was a largely centralized and constant variable, wherein interactions between different parts of the periphery could have little practical consequence. In eighteenth-century South Asia, only those very interactions, occurring in the context of a highly regionalized and diverse political environment, would produce the circumstances of the Company's transformation into an imperial power. The first military conquests of the English East India Company do not fit an "excentric" or "peripheral" model, but rather one of interperipheral imperialism, in which the movement of Britons within the periphery became more influential than their connections with the metropole.

CHAPTER TWO
The First India: Conflict in the Karnatik

Introduction

In the seventeenth century, Mughal political life congregated at Delhi, countless noblemen, diplomats, and petitioners filling the vast halls of the emperor's vibrant *darbar*. The English East India Company, in its first trading missions to South Asia, was no exception, and the Directors funded expensive and lengthy expeditions to that central city in fervent attempts to win imperial concessions. Early in the eighteenth century, though, the process of political regionalization had sufficiently progressed that these envoys, despite impressive diplomatic successes such as the wide-ranging *firman* of 1717, rarely led to practical commercial gains. Increasingly, the history of the English Company, like the history of South Asia itself, unfurled along the peripheries, certain coastal corporate settlements making the transformation from a commercial to a military focus. To understand that development, we must leave Delhi's palaces to travel south through the arid plains of the Deccan plateau and to follow its winter rivers to the eastern shores of the Karnatik (modern-day Tamil Nadu).[1] There, on the Coromandel Coast, stretching from India's southernmost tip to the Northern Circars just beneath Bengal, were some of the subcontinent's most desirable deepwater ports. One of those, Madras (today's Chennai), nestled in between the last curves of the Elambere River as it ran into the Bay of Bengal, played host to the English Company's oldest fortified stronghold in South Asia.[2]

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[1] The eighteenth-century province of the Karnatik shares no geographic connection with the present-day state of Karnataka, which lies much further to the west, sharing its borders with the historic Mysore kingdom.

[2] Herman Moll, "A Plan of Fort St. George and the City of Madras," Modern History: or a Present State of all Nations (London: Bettesworth & Hitch, 1726), http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00maplinks/Mughal/mollmaps/madras1726/madras1726.html. Fort St. George in Madras was built in the 1640s. Lenman, "The East India Company and the Emperor Aurangzeb," 25.

That settlement, somewhat preposterously known as Fort St. George, was but a small structure enclosing some four hundred square yards of cramped space stuffed full of European houses, churches, and warehouses—all defended by "a slender wall" and four poorly kept bastions.[3] Clearly, this was no fortress by contemporary standards, but, for over a century, few living in its shadow gave much thought to improving these negligible defenses. This indifference met with a rude awakening on 04 August 1746. Waking to calls of alarm, Company servants peered over the crumbling parapets, and, in the harbor beneath their derelict walls, they saw to their horror a line of soldiers, all told nearly two thousand strong, disembarking under the flag of the French Compagnie.[4] Nicholas Morse, president of Fort St. George, scrambled to defend the fort. His best efforts to mobilize troops, though, were stymied by years of military neglect: he could muster up fewer than a thousand men. These soldiers presented a striking and worrying contrast to the well-disciplined troops of the French Compagnie. The English troops had experience only in marching back and forth on parade exercises dictated by Peter Eckman, their seventy-year-old "ageing, incompetent, and pugnacious" commander.[5]

Unable to meet the Compagnie's attack himself, Morse held out slim hope that one of the stronger military powers in the region, either the British naval fleet in the Indian Ocean or the Karnatik state's army, might come to his rescue, but no hint of such help appeared. As the French troops, commanded by the admiral Bertrand-François Mahé de la Bourdonnais, pressed their advantage, Morse's situation deteriorated almost to the point of absurdity. Eckman stormed out of the war council when his strategic plan was refused,

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[3] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 65.
[4] The French Compagnie's army was made up of 1100 European soldiers, 400 South Asian sepoys, and 400 Africans Ibid., I, 67.
[5] Quote from James Lawford, *Britain's army in India : from its origins to the conquest of Bengal* (Boston: G. Allen & Unwin, 1978), 71; Marc Vigié, D*upleix* ([Paris]: Fayard, 1993), 233.

defiance for which he was nearly convicted of mutiny.[6] The morning the Compagnie

opened fire on the fort, Morse's chief gunner dropped dead of a heart attack, not, as one

might expect, out of panic, but rather out of shock that his wife had been cuckolding him.[7]

Given these misfortunes, one imagines that Morse was likely relieved on 08 August to

accept La Bourdonnais's demand for unconditional surrender. The French Compagnie

took control of the rather sorry fort, and the Company servants fled some hundred miles to

the south to their sister settlement at Fort St. David, near the town of Cuddalore. Though

this holding, at least by Orme's estimation, was "better fortified than any [fort] of its size

in India", those ensconced within were terrified that La Bourdonnais might to decide to

complete his victory over the Madras Presidency with a second attack against this ill-

prepared corporation.[8]

The siege of Fort St. George rests in relative obscurity today, but the engagement

had spectacular consequences for the history of South Asia, helping to catalyze a massive

shift in the corporations' relationships with local governments. Company servants

escaping Madras were angry that the Karnatik Nawab, Anwaruddin, had not mobilized to

protect their settlements, later complaining to London that "it must…appear to...all the

World a very Extraordinary circumstance that the Nabob and Country Government should

permit our Enemies to Take this Advantage of us".[9] These grumbles, though, were

unwarranted: Anwaruddin was furious to learn of the attack, which subverted his

sovereignty in the region as much as it eroded the Company's trade position, but the

rapidity of Madras's collapse had prevented him from rescuing the English Company.

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[6] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 72.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 78.
[9] General Letter to the Company. 17 Oct 1746. Madras (India : Presidency), *Despatches to England.*
(Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1919), II, 3.

Nevertheless, Anwaruddin remained determined "to put forth the hand of discipline and to pull the ears of the wicked".[10] As quickly as he could, he marshaled up his own force under the command of his eldest son, Mafuz Khan, entreating them to dislodge the French from their most recent acquisition.

Mafuz Khan marched against the Compagnie with some ten thousand men in October 1746.[11] The size of his army seemed to promise him smooth victory over the French, but their new commander, Jean François Dupleix, was not content to await destruction in the now entirely dilapidated walls of Fort St. George. As Mafuz Khan neared the settlement, Dupleix sent out one thousand men under his best officer, an engineer named Paradis, to attack the Karnatik troops preemptively. On 26 October 1746, they met in battle at the Adyar River. The Compagnie's soldiers, both the Europeans and their new sepoy colleagues, South Asian recruits who had been trained in the European model, marched unhesitatingly in tight formation against Mafuz Khan's men, firing volley after precise volley as they forded through the shallow waters. Their opponents panicked in the face of this coordinated attack, infantry and cavalry alike racing across the coastal plains to take hurried shelter in the nearby town of St. Thomé. As the winter monsoons of 1746 approached, the French Compagnie seemed safe in a new role as the dominant military power of the province.

Paradis's charge across the river Adyar has long served as a keystone of the imperial narrative, an epoch-defining, indeed an epoch-creating, moment. In his *Decisive Battles of India*, G. B. Malleson writes that the engagement "introduced a fresh order of things" and was "the first decided step to the conquest of Hindústán by a European

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[10] Muhammad Nainar, *Sources of the history of the nawwābs of the Carnatic. `Translated into English by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nainar. (Ma*dras: University of Madras, 1939), 115.
[11] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 29.

power".[12] More recently, Philip Mason has described it as the point when European traders in South Asia "ceased to be suppliants; from now on it was they who were courted" as desirable military allies.[13] Geoffrey Parker follows this argument closely, calling the battle "a turning point in Indian history".[14] To attribute so much to a conflict lasting no more than a few hours and resulting in not an inch of territory officially gained seems an exercise in hyperbole, but the battle here is remembered less for its direct consequences than for the means used to achieve them. Dupleix's sepoys, firing volleys from carefully maintained lines, demonstrated a new infantry model based on the European military revolution that few in South Asia had ever witnessed and even fewer had ever attempted for themselves.[15] Paradis's victory at Adyar, remembered as the debut of these tactics, demonstrated their remarkable efficacy, and the battle inspired both country and Company forces to undertake their own rapid reforms in imitation of Dupleix's men.

The importance of Adyar, for all that it marks a convenient milestone in the militarization of the European corporations, can be overstated. Malleson considers the conflict "the first decided step" to European empire in India, but this teleological connection between the French Compagnie in 1746 and the Company's later Raj seems too strong. If Adyar had marked the moment when the imperial project became inevitable, as some have suggested, it seems inexplicable that Dupleix did not push on to achieve that destiny. In stark juxtaposition to that hypothetical conquest, the French Compagnie in fact would slowly fade out of existence in the next few decades. The English Company was equally unable to render the innovations pioneered at Adyar into an immediate empire.

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[12] Malleson, *The decisive battles of India*, 16.
[13] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 30.
[14] Parker, *The military revolution*, 133.
[15] Ibid.

Over a decade would pass before it won its first nominal imperial territory at the Battle of

Plassey in 1757, and almost a generation had yet to unfold before its first overt conquest at

the Battle of Buxar (1764). This chapter will argue that, while elements premiered at

Adyar would prove essential for that later imperialism, the formula was hardly set in

1746. Much more than the Company's infantry tactics and organization would have to

change before its servants would begin to conceive of empire as a possible and desirable

objective.

In order to achieve such empire, the Madras Presidency would need both an army

capable of challenging South Asian power and a leadership willing to do so. To some

scholars, La Bourdonnais's attack on Fort St. George was the catalyst for both of these

changes, spillover hostilities from the European War of Austrian Succession inspiring the

French and English corporations to take up arms against each other. In this narrative, the

First and Second Carnatic Wars (1746-1748 and 1749-1753, respectively) provided a

context in which the French and English companies could hone their previously lacking

military skills against each other and, ultimately, turn them on weaker South Asian

powers. In this narrative, the long interval between Adyar and Plassey (1757) existed only

because the Madras Presidency could not import a fully mature European-style army to

South Asia packed into a single hold.[16] As this chapter will demonstrate, though,

shipments out of London were not enough on their own: the ability to exploit the

innovations of the military revolution in South Asia could not be boxed up like so much

bullion and sent with the yearly investments out of Leadenhall Street.

The most significant obstacle to this importation was simply the fact that the

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[16] Parker, *The military revolution* , 134; G. J. Bryant, "British logistics and the conduct of the Carnatic Wars (1746-1783).," *War in History* 11, no. 3 (2004): 278, 285; G. J. Bryant, "Indigenous mercenaries in the service of European imperialists: The Case of the sepoys in the early British Indian Army, 1750-1800.," *War in History* 7, no. 1 (2000): 4.

innovations of the European military revolution were naturally designed for a European geopolitical context and simply could not operate as effectively transplanted halfway around the world. Much of the Company's efforts between Adyar and Plassey were involved not just in building up this army, but more intensely in revising and modifying that borrowed model to create what Kaushik Roy has dubbed "a Balanced Military Synthesis", a hybrid army of European and South Asian strategies that could function effectively on the subcontinent.[17] Imperial dreams emerged in concert with this synthesis. Though it is easy to assume in hindsight that the English Company was always a latently imperial power, the sorry state of Fort St. George in 1746 suggests that Morse and many of his contemporaries had no such ambitions. Those objectives emerged only later, when the increasing military capabilities of the Madras Presidency encouraged and indeed required an administration increasingly germane to the idea of conquest.

While La Bourdonnais's siege in 1746 helped to spur the Company to undertake the first steps along the path to militarization, I argue that neither this attack nor the resulting conflict between the two companies can explain how quickly the Madras Presidency's army expanded into an imperial identity. The War of Austrian Succession ended in 1748, when the English Company's army was making its first, incompetent forays on the battlefield. If European political machinations had been the only factor behind the Company's militarization, there is no reason that the army should have continued to grow after this conflict. But the two corporations' actions in the First Carnatic War rendered them attractive potential allies to local rulers and would-be rulers, themselves engaged their own wars. Embroiling itself within local alliances, the Madras Presidency found that its mercenary wages played an increasingly vital role in their annual

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[17] Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia," 655.

profits, and desperation to maintain these revenue streams opened the door in the presidency's administration for warmongering servants to wield massive influence. As these men rose to dominance in the presidency's administration, Madras's objectives increasingly turned towards explicit territorial ambitions. I posit that the emergence of these imperial goals in the Madras Presidency in the mid-eighteenth century was not, as is often argued, the function of European or British politics, but instead of the Madras Presidency's reconfiguration of its role in the Karnatik's political fabric.

Europe's Eastern War

Given the centrality of Francophobia to British national identity in the eighteenth century, it should hardly be surprising to find that the French and English corporations at odds in South Asia.[18] Yet, as primed as British subjects might have been to dislike their fellow Europeans at Pondicherry, traditionally, the Compagnie and the Company, together with the Dutch VOC, had treated each other remarkably amicably when on South Asian soil, reserving their fights for naval battles. Though they competed and conspired against each other hotly in trade, this hostility remained mostly commercial. In 1744, for instance, the Madras Presidency reported proudly to the Court of Directors their efforts to prevent the French Compagnie from purchasing any local cloth.[19] For many in the Company, the prospect of a more violent confrontation was simply too costly to be borne. The onus of the siege of Fort St. George and the war that followed the attack cannot be located on the periphery, but instead must be traced back as an artifact of European hostilities impressed upon traders who would likely not have agitated for this military shift on their own.

Though political tensions between France and Britain were by no stretch of the

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[18] Colley, *Britons* , esp. 24-5, 33.
[19] General Letter to the Court of Directors. 05 Sept. 1744. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Despatches to England.*, 26.

imagination an historical oddity, the middle of the eighteenth century saw these conflicts achieve new reach to match the states' newfound global expansion. No longer could war between the two countries be restricted to clashes across the narrow Channel or even to battles across the European continent. Seeking to disrupt the French economy during the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the British Crown sent a royal squadron to the Indian Ocean in 1744 to cut off French Compagnie trade. As Captains Barnett and Peyton, the fleet's successive admirals, harried the Compagnie's ships, both British and French corporate settlements in South Asia scrambled to ensure that these skirmishes would not affect their daily operations. Morse, though, as president of Fort St. George, hampered these negotiations by refusing to sign any truce regulating Barnett's actions, arguing that he had no authority over the Crown's navy.[20] Anwaruddin found himself in a similar position. While he decreed that wars between Europeans should take place "only in their homeland, and not in this land of peace, this heart-exhilarating country", he too had no power over Barnett's fleet.[21] For the Compagnie, this state of affairs must have seemed particularly unjust. The British were free to use their own military advantage against the French, but Pondicherry was prohibited from levying its own strong land-based army against the English garrison at Fort St. George, full of "the worst men in the world for the service".[22]

Significantly, though, it would not be Pondicherry who acted upon this imbalance. Instead, it was La Bourdonnais who took this decisive step. An officer in the French navy and a Compagnie official formally stationed in Mauritius, La Bourdonnais had little experience in the Karnatik's political landscape in which Dupleix and the other

[20] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 69-70.
[21] Quoted in Nainar, *Sources of the history of the nawwābs of the Carnatic,* 115.
[22] Vigié, D*upleix,* 233.

Frenchmen at Pondicherry had long been habituated. Just as Morse could not control

Barnett and Peyton, so was Dupleix unable to direct La Bourdonnais's actions. Though he

fired a cannon in Pondicherry to celebrate news of the admiral's victory, he had played no

part in planning the siege on Madras.[23] His role would come later, in the weeks following

the siege when he and La Bourdonnais clashed sharply over the fate of the English

settlement. La Bourdonnais intended to keep the fort in French control, while Dupleix

wanted to cede Madras to Anwaruddin, ridding himself of the hassle of conquest and

repairing the damage done to the Compagnie's relationship with the Nawab.[24] So heated

did this argument become that La Bourdonnais left the Coromandel Coast in a fury, taking

his ships back to Mauritius and from thence to France. This personal feud illustrates a

fundamental divergence between those men such as Dupleix, long tenured in South Asia,

and those such as La Bourdonnais, more closely connected to his Crown. The opening

salvo of the First Carnatic War, the attack of Fort St. George, stemmed not from that first

group of employees integrated in the subcontinent, but rather from the latter acting on

directives from Europe.

Both the French and British metropoles continued to exert influence in the First

Carnatic War even after La Bourdonnais's abrupt departure. In fact, the attack on Fort St.

George served to galvanize the Court of Directors in London into a newly militarized role,

and the men of Leadenhall Street did their best to support Fort St. David's frantic

militarization with whatever materiel and manpower they could grasp. Guns and bullets

filled up holds in place of bullion, and the number of soldiers sent to the Madras

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[23] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 76; Vigié, D*upleix,* 237.
[24] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 76.

Presidency more than doubled between 1746 to 1747, from 64 to 134 men.[25] This trend

would continue into the next decade, with a peak of 509 new soldiers arriving in the

Karnatik during the 1754-1755 shipping season.[26] Though most of these men left little

mark on history beyond a name on a register, one new arrival, the portly man who stepped

off the *Winchelsea* at Cuddalore in 1748, almost single-handedly transformed the

Company into a military power. As the new commander for the Company's troops,

Stringer Lawrence would wield such influence as to earn the later title as the "Father of

the Indian Army".[27] The first veteran of the Royal Army to serve as a Company officer,

Lawrence brought an intimate knowledge of that force's military style and tactical

abilities to the Madras Presidency, an education that inspired a spate of eponymous

reforms that would do much to turn the Company's sorry garrisons into an effective

military force.

Lawrence's arrival in India indicates that a major shift had occurred in the Court of

Directors' mentality away from its position in the mid-seventeenth century that "all war

is…contrary to our interest".[28] The British Crown was equally eager to see the Company's

defensive abilities brought up to modern standards, especially insofar as these

developments might harass the French. The Royal Navy maintained a constant presence in

the Indian Ocean throughout the period under investigation, and in 1752 the Crown

became even more active in the Company's wars by sending a division of the royal army

to Madras under command of Colonel Adlercron specifically intended to support the

[25] Appendix IV of Henry Dodwell, *Calendar of the Madras despatches, 1744-1755. by Henry Dodwell,...* (Madras: Government press, 1920), 266.
[26] For 1740s, see Ibid., 266-7. Though the number of men sent in 1748 reached only 100, this was still markedly higher than the 1746 low, and, by 1751, 291 men were sent. For 1754-1755 peak, see Henry Dodwell, *Calendar of the Madras despatches, 1754-1765, by Henry Dodwell,...* (Madras: Government press, 1930), 449
[27] See J. Biddulph, *Stringer Lawrence, the father of the Indian army* (London: J. Murray, 1901)
[28] Quote from Lenman, "The East India Company and the Emperor Aurangzeb," 27.

presidency's existing military apparatus. Such instances of official encouragement from both Leadenhall Street and Whitehall somewhat complicate the view articulated by such scholars as K. N. Chaudhuri that the Madras Presidency's militarization was a peripherally driven development at odds with home-based institutions.[29]

Nevertheless, no matter how involved Whitehall and Leadenhall Street were in the Madras Presidency's militarization, their efforts would have come to naught if political pressures in South Asia had not been germane to that development. Indeed, without the actions of Anwaruddin, the English Company would likely have lost its settlements in the Karnatik before the first shipment of new recruits could even leave port in London. The defeat of Mafuz Khan at the Battle of Adyar had only redoubled the Nawab's determination to "pull the ears of the French", and he almost immediately mustered up a second army under his son Hadrat-Ala to march once again against the Compagnie.[30] For the English, this determination proved their salvation: Hadrat-Ala arrived at Fort St. David in early 1747, like the ever-punctual cavalry of a western film, just in time to beat the French Compagnie's back from the English gates. This victory demonstrated to all that Anwaruddin's determination to bring French warmongering back under his control, while simultaneously giving English settlements in the Karkantik respite enough for them to embark on a hasty militarization of their own. Conventional narratives generally depict this development as the result of the English Company's exploitation of "[t]he weakness of local rulers", but to a great extent the Madras Presidency's militarization was possible only through the *strength* of that same government.[31]

The presidency's desperate attempts to catch up to Dupleix had resulted, by 1748,

[29] K Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 55-6, 115.
[30] Nainar, *Sources of the history of the nawwābs of the Carnatic,* 116.
[31] Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 129.

in at least the semblance of an offensive infantry, and in September the Company

launched its own attack against Pondicherry. From the beginning, this campaign was

astonishingly ill-conceived. Orme writes that the French fort was considered throughout

South Asia a wonder of fortification, and its placement within a knot of jagged hills and

inhospitable terrain "altogether formed a defence impenetrable to cavalry, and of very

difficult passage to infantry".[32] Against this formidable target, the Madras Presidency's

nascent military proved singularly incapable, earning Orme's judgment that "there are few

instances…of a siege carried on by Europeans with more ignorance than this".[33] Weeks

were lost at the outset of the expedition as the army became distracted with reducing an

outwork of little strategic value, and, in those initial assaults, Lawrence himself was taken

prisoner. The Company's remaining officers had little practical battle experience, and,

when the army finally reached Pondicherry, they entrenched themselves in such a poor

position that not a single one of their bombardments made a dent against the fort proper.

Nevertheless, despite the fiascos rampant throughout the siege of Pondicherry, the

engagement is significant as the moment when the English corporation joined its French

counterpart as an active, if rather unimpressive, military agent in the Karnatik.

The attack on Pondicherry petered out after only a few weeks, as epidemic

decimated the Company's troops in their muddy trenches.[34] The army retreated back to

Fort St. David on 06 October, and, before either corporation could begin another assault,

news arrived that the war in Europe had ended. Diplomats, hammering out the peace

terms at Aix-la-Chapelle, had not forgotten the South Asian theater of conflict, and the

French Compagnie was ordered to return the captured settlements back to the English.

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[32] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 43 and 101.
[33] Ibid., I, 110.
[34] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 83.

The Madras Presidency thus found itself once again in possession of its titular city, but the Court of Directors demanded the council continue to administer the region from the better defended Fort St. David until Fort St. George's walls could be repaired. These negotiations brought the First Carnatic War to its unsatisfying end: almost every part of the conflict, from Barnett's early raids on French shipping to the ultimate peace terms, had been dictated by the metropole. The companies, for all the expense and effort of their militarization, had concluded nothing between themselves, and their battles little affected the overarching war's outcome. Though Anwaruddin's involvement played an integral role in the war, it is difficult to argue that the First Carnatic War was, at any level, a local conflict.

The First Steps towards Militarism

The Court of Directors seemed to expect that the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle would end the two companies' brush with warfare and induce them to return to their erstwhile commercial foci. Given that the council at Fort St. David, with the exception of Lawrence, was still an entirely civilian body, it would likely preferred to comply with these expectations, but its expulsion out of Madras and the other campaigns of the First Carnatic War had disrupted their access to many of the trading networks they had once found so profitable. In 1745, the Madras Presidency had accrued a record level of revenue, but La Bourdonnais's attack sufficiently interrupted that trade to halve its profits in 1746. [35] In the next eight years, revenue would never reach much more than two-thirds of its previous levels.[36] Charles Floyer, the new president at Fort St. David, was desperate to make up that lost revenue, and, in the face of the failure of their traditional trading methods, he and

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[35] Dodwell, *Calendar of the Madras despatches, 1744-1755. by Henry Dodwell,...*, xvi.
[36] Ibid.

his council sought to transform their newly acquired and costly field army into a well of

profit. This determination matched the goals of local politicians, rulers, and even

merchants throughout the Karnatik, who were eager to open their arms to the Company as

a potential military ally and source of strategic innovation.

The presidency's first attempts to profit from its army betray its pervasive desire

use its military primarily as a tool to expand trade opportunities, not to acquire formal

political territories. Indeed, some of its earliest engagements were designed simply to

regain full access to the trade networks of the prewar period. For instance, when the king

of Pegu (in modern-day Burma) wrote that he would not trade with the Madras Presidency

for fear his goods would fall prey to another European war, Floyer set aside a contingent

of men specifically to protect the king's investment as it traveled through the Karnatik.[37]

Other more active military operations were similarly defined by these commercial

priorities. Most strikingly, almost before the ink had dried on the Treaty of Aix-la-

Chapelle, the presidency sent a large division into Thanjavur, a tiny kingdom (Tanjore in

English records) some hundred miles to the south of Fort St. David. There, the Company's

troops were to help one Sahaji gain the local throne in return for blanket permission to

open a trade center in Devikottah, a small port at the eastern edge of the kingdom.[38]

Though this acquisition never produced the hoped-for profits, the presidency's early

expectations suggest that the council still viewed its army as an instrument with which

new markets could be opened, ultimately allowing the servants to return to their

commercial roots. The idea that the military might become a source of revenue in and of

itself was not born within the walls of Fort St. David, but outside the Company's

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[37] See Letter from Wazirs of Pegu to Madras Presidency. 25 April 1749. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749* (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1908), 17.
[38] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 116.

settlements, as its servants came into contact with the wider political machinations of the Karnatik itself.

The Deccan plateau, and in particular the coastal Karnatik, provided the Madras Presidency a setting more favorable to military expansion than any in South Asia, and the expedition into Thanjavur made use of many of those advantages. In the Karnatik, a plethora of relatively autonomous local power-holders fielding comparably small armies created a set of conflicts in which the Company's nascent military force could intervene decisively, gaining experience on the battlefield without risking contact with a larger, centralized army capable of destroying it. Indeed, had military power in the Deccan been monopolized in a single centralized force, the First Carnatic War would likely never have come to pass. La Bourdonnais's decision to attack Fort St. George was predicated on his assumption that Anwaruddin's relatively small regional army could not prevent European warfare in the Karnatik. Where, as we shall see, the Nawabs' more centralized administration in Bengal was too powerful a force for Company servants to defy in the mid-eighteenth century, the Deccan's long history of political fragmentation and local autonomy limited the ability of political officials to control and to command European actions in the Karnatik.

This relatively low level of centralization had the weight of history behind it, and conquerors for centuries had struggled to overcome the Deccan's craggy hills and rapidly changing geography. Despite the most earnest efforts of these would-be unifiers, pockets of independent kingdoms and autonomous fiefdoms, such as those under control of the Karnatik *paliyakarars* (poligars in English archives), resisted all challenges to their

sovereignty from their seats in the province's formidable hills.[39] Aurangzeb had himself

tried to take the plateau, and his long campaigns in the region had only served to

exacerbate that ancient fragmentation. Desperate to bring the region into the Mughal

imperial system, the emperor spent his last thirty years in a constant quest for this elusive

goal, marching his court from camp to camp and his army from battle to battle.[40] This

never-ending war made the region a particularly attractive one to some of his *mansabdari*

who had spent their childhoods and early adulthoods campaigning across its horizons

alongside the emperor. One of the most ambitious of these was Nizam ul-Mulk, born Chin

Quilich Khan. According to his biographer, Satish Chandra, he "had always looked upon

the Deccan as the land of dreams…his own by right of the sword".[41] So convinced, the

Nizam threw himself fully into a quest to secure that right and to establish his own

personal kingdom centered in Hyderabad. On paper, this goal deviated little from the

ambitions of, for instance, Murshid Quli Khan, who founded a dynasty in Bengal, but the

Deccan's political realities presented the Nizam with obstacles Murshid Quli Khan had

avoided. First, Nizam ul-Mulk was not the only Mughal captivated by the striped cliffs

and fertile fields of the Deccan, and, to solidify his claim, he had to commit himself to

decades of fierce war against the equally enchanted powers in Delhi.

Even after Hyderabad secured its autonomy in 1724, the threat of war with the

imperial center still loomed large on the Nizam's northern horizon, diverting his attentions

from more internal state affairs. That distraction hindered his ability to control his state at

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[39] Aurangzeb, for instance, found that his army was unable to penetrate the hill-fort of Padiyah Nayak of the eastern Deccan despite launching multiple sieges spanning several months each. J. F. Richards, "The Imperial Crisis in the Deccan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (February 1976): 246-47
[40] Andrea Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and its decline : an interpretation of the sources of social power* (Brookfield Vt.: Ashgate, 1997), 167.
[41] Quoted in M. A. Nayeem. "The Asaf Jahs of Hyderabad" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 28.

the local level. Though Aurangzeb's campaigns had wiped out the remnants of the

crumbling Vijaynagara Empire and defeated the younger kingdom of Golconda, J. F.

Richards argues that the emperor was far less successful in reconfiguring the Deccan

around the Mughal state structure.[42] Nizam ul-Mulk thus found that his position as a

Mughal *mansab* had less meaning in the Deccan than it would have in other parts of South

Asia. His government in Hyderabad came into sharp contention with alternate political

models from contesting expansionist states, including the Maratha Confederacy and the

kingdom of Mysore. Wars to win central authority in the Deccan plateau wracked Nizam

ul-Mulk's administration, and, as adamantly as he and his successors would claim the

Deccan as their own province, their practical control remained extraordinarily shallow at

the local level throughout much of the region.[43]

Against Nizam ul-Mulk or against a Maratha cavalry, the Madras Presidency's

army in 1749 could not have lasted a single day. Despite the rapid expansion undertaken

in the First Carnatic War, Fort St. David commanded no more than a few thousand troops.

In contrast, Nasir Jung (r. 1748-1750), one of Nizam ul-Mulk's successors, purportedly

campaigned in the Karnatik with an army of one hundred thousand soldiers and a camp of

more than a *million* hangers-on.[44] But the Nizam's wars were not the only source of

military conflict in the Deccan. His relatively incomplete control had brought prosperity to

many of the Deccan's smaller polities. Nicholas Dirks, for instance, has shown how the

small kingdom of Pudukkottai, to the west of Thanjavur, exploited Hyderabad's

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[42] Richards, "The Imperial Crisis in the Deccan," 238.
[43] Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 496.
[44] Letter from Muhammad Ali Khan to Charles Floyer. Received 25 Oct 1750. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 50 Camp followers given on Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 45

distraction to expand into an independent and highly structured state.[45] As such polities

grew, though, they naturally came into conflict with each other, creating a level of military

engagement in which the Company's small army could be effective. Had the Nizam's

central government been able to bring its full power to bear against these autonomous

lords, the Madras Presidency's forces would have been redundant and unnecessary, and its

troops would never have had the opportunity to hone and to improve their skills in active

battle. Its early mission to Thanjavur in 1749, making use of this fragmentation, might

have been conceived of and justified as an attempt to gain a new trading center, but

expeditions such as this one were necessary steps to the development of an army capable

of and eager for imperial conquest.

<div style="text-align:center">The Carnatic Wars Become Karnatik</div>

The administrators who ordered Company troops into Thanjavur in 1749 would

not have identified themselves as military men, nor did they conceive of such

engagements as the ideal form of involvement with South Asian polities. Madras

Presidency's shift in focus towards overt imperial militarism was not directly a function of

the First Carnatic War or its immediate aftermath, but emerged instead in that series of

disputes known in European scholarship as the Second Carnatic War (1749-1753). Unlike

its predecessor, this conflict had little connection to Western political struggles, emanating

instead from disagreements endogenous to the Deccan itself. Initially, the Madras

Presidency seems to have conceived of its involvement in this war as yet another attempt

in the tradition of the Thanjavur expedition to squeeze a few rupees from their otherwise

useless military. However, the Company was drawn ever deeper into the war until,

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[45] Nicholas Dirks, *The hollow crown : ethnohistory of an Indian kingdom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 197.

astonishingly quickly, the Company's survival in the south became contingent on victory in that conflict. As the presidency's existence became predicated on local politics, it was no longer enough simply to send a few men here and there as mercenary support, and militaristic servants were able to justify expanding the Company's military capabilities and involvement far beyond what either the Court of Directors or the Madras council had envisioned. In the context of the Second Carnatic War, the Madras Presidency would make its fateful transformation from moonlighting as a local provider of mercenary mercenaries to engaging actively as a military and political participant in these wars, adopting an increasingly dominant role in questions of diplomacy, strategy, and governance in the conflicts.

The Second Carnatic War followed its predecessor almost without an intermission. Anwaruddin had finally checked Dupleix's designs, but in 1749 he found himself face to face with another, more dangerous foe, this time one that offered direct and explicit challenge to his throne. This threat centered on Chanda Sahib, a young and ambitious military commander who had until 1748 been imprisoned with the Marathas. Even before he had secured his freedom, Chanda Sahib had begun to agitate against Anwaruddin.[46] His network of allies grew quickly, influential Karnatik officials as well as the French Compagnie flocking to his side, and Anwaruddin discovered that he was ill-equipped to match this show of support.[47] The Nawab had been installed on his seat by the Nizam of Hyderabad after a series of assassinations wiped out the previous dynasty, and his position as a usurping outsider thus rendered Anwaruddin a less popular choice for ruler than

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[46] Chanda Sahib was actually in consultations with Dupleix about a possible alliance as early as 1745. Vigié, D*upleix,* 189
[47] Ibid., 299.

Chanda Sahib, an accomplished Karnatik native.[48] His allies fell away from him rapidly,

his closest lords betraying him in battle. Chanda Sahib wasted no time in exploiting these

difficulties, and, in 1749, Anwaruddin was decapitated on the field at the Battle of Ambur,

leaving his successor, Muhammad Ali Khan, to contend against an increasingly powerful

coalition of enemies with an increasingly empty coalition of friends.

From this decidedly unenviable position, Muhammad Ali was desperate for help

from any corner, and the English Company, so fresh from its own war, appeared

conspicuously as a possible ally. Though the soldiers of the Madras Presidency, having

embarrassed themselves in the siege of Pondicherry in 1748, were considered less capable

than Dupleix's troops, even a poorly drilled musket was better than none at all.[49] At first,

Muhammad Ali was cautious, requesting only a tiny artillery corps of four men from Fort

St. David, but, before Charles Floyer could even respond to the request, he changed his

mind and demanded instead a full contingent of fifteen hundred men—five hundred

Europeans and one thousand of the newly trained sepoy troops.[50] Floyer was less than

enthusiastic about the prospect of involving the Company in the war, perhaps unsure of its

potential for revenue, but Muhammad Ali was not going to accept a neutral stance. Angry

at Floyer's stalling, he wrote to Fort St. David that his father's assistance in the First

Carnatic War had put the Company's servants "under a Friendly Obligation to me".[51] In

the end, Floyer agreed to send 663 sepoys and 31 Europeans to his aid, as well as an

engineer to shore up his headquarters in Tiruccirappalli.[52] The Madras Presidency's

belated entry into the Second Carnatic War clearly did not stem out of European politics

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[48] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 52.
[49] Letter to Court of Directors. 06 Aug 1751."East India Series 1," 15.
[50] Letters from Muhammad Ali Khan to Charles Floyer. Received 05 Aug. and 02 Sept. 1749. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 28, 33.
[51] Letter from Muhammad Ali Khan to Charles Floyer. Received 22 Sept. 1749. Ibid., 38.
[52] Letter from Charles Floyer to Muhammad Ali Khan. 03 Oct 1749. Ibid., 42.

or even from any eager warmongering within Fort St. David, but instead was a function of its involvement with local political institutions. Nevertheless, if Floyer initially hesitated, his decision to support Muhammad Ali points to a gradual change already overtaking the presidency's outlook and bringing it towards a more politically militaristic stance.

Floyer's willingness to send Muhammad Ali military support seems to fly in the face of the Madras Presidency's earlier policies, both military and commercial. In fact, the Fort St. George Council had been desperate to avoid participation in the succession crises that had rocked the Karnatik in the early 1740s, fearing that any active intervention in such a conflict in its backyard, as it were, might reverberate into disastrous consequences for the Company's trade, especially if the presidency was unlucky enough to support the losing claimant. In 1743, in the wake of the war that brought Anwaruddin into power, the council reported proudly to the Court of Directors that it had "[c]arried on with a decent Respect to both Partys, not siding with either".[53] The military support sent to Muhammad Ali in 1749 stands in direct contradiction to such precedents. The apparent inversion of priorities, though, becomes instantly more explicable when one reads the Nawab's request for troops more closely. In a postscript to one of these requests, Muhammad Ali promised to the Company the rights to fortify and to collect taxes from the town of Mylapore.[54] For the Madras Presidency, struggling to recoup revenue lost in the last war, this new potential source of profit must have seemed incredibly enticing, and the council willingly adopted the new role in the Karnatik as a provider of mercenaries in return for these tax farms.

This arrangement, troops for taxes, helps to dispel a misassumption plaguing the historiography of the Second Carnatic War. Traditionally, the war has been depicted as a

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[53] Abstract of General Letter to the Court of Directors. 27 Jan 1743. *Despatches to England.*, I, 2
[54] Letter from Muhammad Ali to Floyer. Received 07 Oct. 1749. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 44.

strict continuation of its predecessor: in short, another round between the French and English companies with Chanda Sahib and Muhammad Ali tacking their own petty altercation onto the coattails of that far more significant conflict. In her children's classic, *Our Island Story*, H. E. Marshall writes "[w]hen war broke out…Some of the native Indians fought for the French and some for the British".[55] James P. Lawford writes of the conflict in the same vein, arguing that the two corporations were interested in "a quarrel between two Indian princes" only insofar as it allowed a vicarious continuation of the war so prematurely ended with the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.[56] In fact, these accounts are rather backwards in their explanation. Floyer's decision to ally his presidency with Muhammad Ali had little to do with European politics, and the Nawab, in requesting that support, was looking for mercenaries, not an existing war to house his own objectives. Indeed, the resumption of hostilities between the two companies was the *result*, not the cause, of their participation in this conflict. None of Floyer's letters to Mohammed Ali Khan as the two men hammered out their first military relationship in 1749 include any reference to fears of French aggression against the Company. It is only later, after the two companies began to engage each other on opposing sides in the conflict, that such anxieties can be found in the Madras Presidency's correspondence. By 1751, in contrast to Floyer's reticence on the subject, the men of Fort St. David panicked amongst themselves about the supposed French threat, convinced without much ground that "[s]hould our Army be successful and Chunda Saib and his Son or whole Family be slain, they [the French] still would find a Rebel and a pretence to suit their Purposes".[57] This suggests that the resumption of warfare between the troops of the two corporations was not the result of

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[55] Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, *An island story* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1906), 435.
[56] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 108
[57] Letter from the Madras Presidency to the Court of Directors. 06 Aug 1751. "East India Series 1," 15

internal hostility carried over from the First Carnatic War, but emerged instead as the companies' armies encountered each other on opposite sides of the line as mercenaries in a fundamentally South Asian war.

In the coming years, that hostility as well as the power that the Company had to act upon those feelings would grow to a pitch that none could have inferred from the limited expedition of 694 men Floyer sent out in 1749, but even within that decision were the seeds of that transformation. The Nawab, by promising the Madras Presidency tax rights over Mylapore, perhaps unintentionally effected the beginnings of this change: his *firman* bound the men of Fort St. David to the Karnatik as a locality and as a state, rather than simply as a place through which trade networks ran. The tax farm obliged the Madras Presidency to cultivate two new levels of "country" interaction, requiring its servants to engage first with locals in Mylapore in order to collect those taxes and second with Karnatik officials who oversaw the larger governmental structure that gave them those rights of collection. This latter relationship further ensured that the Madras Presidency had a vested interest in seeing Muhammad Ali emerge as victor from the war: Chanda Sahib was unlikely to support the *firmans* granted by his enemy. What had appeared to Floyer and others in the presidency as simply another way to supplement flagging revenue thus resulted in an unprecedented political role and set of political interests for the Company, tying it firmly to the Karnatik state.

In 1749, though, those bonds were not inseparable. The potential profits offered by Mylapore could not have made much of a dent in the presidency's overall shortfall, and the acquisition of the tax farm was more of an experimental sideline venture than a crucial source of revenue for the Company. Both Chanda Sahib and Muhammad Ali, though, would seek shrewdly throughout their succession conflict to embroil the companies ever

more deeply in their causes by playing the one against the other. Already in 1749, the

Nawab had begun to articulate this increasingly important strategy: Mylapore itself had

been given to the French by an earlier *firman*.[58] Muhammad Ali's reversal of that decree

thus simultaneously provided his allies with new potential revenues while reducing the

profit of one of opponents. Throughout the war, the two Nawab claimants would continue

this pattern, promising their respective corporate allies rights to the other's lands, ports,

and settlements. Quickly, it became clear to all involved that the war was not just going to

determine who would sit on the Arcot throne: it would also decide which of the two

militarized European companies could continue to ply its trade in the Karnatik. By the

early 1750s, what had begun as a minor mission to earn some extra cash had become a

desperate fight for the presidency's survival. As one councilman cognizant of this threat

would write in 1752, "the Honour of our Nation [is] at Stake, the Welfare of our Masters,

to whom we owe our Fortunes in danger".[59]

Ironically, Floyer's attempt to earn a bit of money became, within a few months of

battle, a massive drain on the Madras Presidency's resources. Though the Company was at

first merely a source of mercenaries, its alliance with Muhammad Ali was not without its

costs: in order to secure the rights to Mylapore, the presidency had agreed to absorb all of

their troops' expenses except their *batta*, or daily stipend.[60] Theoretically, the Company's

newfound revenues should have more than covered this overhead, but the actual logistics

of that collection proved unexpectedly difficult and the Company, engaged in increasingly

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[58] Letter from Muhammad Ali to Floyer. Received 07 Oct. 1749. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 44.
[59] Letter to Stringer Lawrence from Madras Military Dept. 16 Feb. 1752. Madras (India : Presidency), *Diary and Consultation Book, Military Department 1752*, Records of Fort St. George (Madras : Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, c1910-), 40.
[60] Letter from Floyer to Muhammad Ali. 15 Jan 1751. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1751* (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1908), 4.

fierce battles in the Karnatik, was unable to spare the manpower needed to secure those taxes. Muhammad Ali exacerbated this dilemma by convincing many individual servants to lend him substantial fortunes, refusing to pay back a single rupee until his reign was secure.[61] As these personal and institutional debts mounted, the promised rewards rose accordingly, Muhammad Ali and Chanda Sahib both guaranteeing their respective allies total commercial monopoly of European trade into the Karnatik in the event of victory. Though by 1750, some in the presidency had begun to realize that "had not Europeans interfer'd in these Affairs, but left them [the South Asian governments] to decide their own Quarrels, it might have been better for Trade", the combination of massive sunk costs and unimaginable potential profit made it difficult to justify abandoning the conflict.[62] Indeed, no serious attempt was ever made by servants in the Karnatik to come to a private accord with either Chanda Sahib or the French Compagnie in order to give up the increasingly costly fray.

Instead, the Madras Presidency devoted more and more of its limited resources to pursuing that war. In 1752, its military transactions were so all-consuming that the council established a separate entity, the Military Department, to address these concerns. The question at hand was no longer, as it had been in Floyer's time, *whether* the Company should engage in local conflicts, but rather *how best* that involvement could proceed. The department, operating from the start with a more militaristic outlook than its more commercially minded superior did, thus became a dedicated forum in which the Company's most imperialistic servants were able to voice their concerns to a council increasingly comprised of officers and likeminded warmongers. Though some servants

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[61] Bryant, "British logistics and the conduct of the Carnatic Wars (1746-1783).," 291.
[62] General Letter to the Court of Directors. 07 Feb 1750. "East India Series 1," 62

remained ambivalent, the militaristic faction grew increasingly influential, its numbers swelling as new officers arrived from London and civil servants, most famously Robert Clive, abandoned their former posts to take up arms. These men sought to entice their more civilian counterparts to follow their lead with promises of unimaginable profits, Stringer Lawrence pithily reassuring doubters in 1753 that "the Rice will sell for more than it costs".[63] More even than debts and promised taxes, the growing influence faction and its eagerness to perpetuate the Second Carnatic War hamstrung the most determined commercial servants from reversing, or even slowing, the presidency's march towards a militarized identity.

Even before the Military Department was inaugurated, the Madras Presidency had deemed the war too important to limit its own involvement any longer to the role of a mere provider of mercenaries. In lieu of simply sending men to Muhammad Ali, militaristic servants in Fort St. David sought to appropriate from the Nawab the power to direct those soldiers in battle and, more significantly, to determine when and where those battles would take place. Already by 1751, Muhammad Ali could only suggest strategies to Thomas Saunders, Floyer's successor at Fort St. David, with the faint hope that the Madras Presidency would accept his recommendations.[64] This transformation from auxiliary ally to primary military power is illustrated best in a letter Muhammad Ali wrote to the fort that year. Attempting to excuse a poor showing by his men in a recent battle, the Nawab explains that they "were never expected to fight they were only to stay with yours for a Shew, But the Battle entirely depends upon your Army…It is your Men's

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[63] Letter from Lawrence to the Mil Dept. 25 Aug 1753. *Diary and Consultation Book, Military Department 1753*, Records of Fort St. George (Madras : Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, c1910-), 141
[64] See, for instance, the letter from Muhammad Ali to Saunders. Received 29 July 1751. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1751*, 47

Business to fight".[65]

For a council whose only "Business" five years earlier had been, at least on the surface, the cloth trade, this was certainly a dizzying metamorphosis, but, as important as the presidency's military affairs had become to its operations, the Company in Fort St. David still maintained a distance between its actions and South Asian politics. Its leadership, both in London and in the Karnatik, was determined that its army should remain supporting allies at least in name, eschewing the formal mantle of "Principal" belligerents, a label that might have had serious diplomatic consequences in Europe if the Company and the Compagnie were perceived as openly warring with each other. This increasingly empty distinction at first led the Madras Presidency to limit its involvement to the battlefield and to avoid any more active political role. Once again, though, the pressures of local politics and the opportunities the presidency saw therein proved more compelling motivation than the distant directives and uncertainties of Leadenhall Street. Though, semantically, the presidency continued to differentiate themselves from the title of "Principal", by 1753 its servants were determined to take from Muhammad Ali the diplomatic initiative as completely as they had usurped his strategic powers.[66]

This shift in policy was precipitated by developments in the far south of the Karnatik, where the Nawab struggled to maintain his administrative seat at Tiruccirappalli. This fort, better known by its English name Trichinopoly, lay some two hundred miles below Fort St. David along the banks of the Kaveri River, nestled amongst the independent kingdoms of Thanjavur, Pudokkottai, and Mysore. In 1751, it was one of the most intimidating forts in the Karnatik, a massive square with high towers, thick,

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Even when dictating the terms of a peace treaty in the Karnatik, the Company was desperate "[t]hat we do not appear as a Principal in this Affair". Letter from Lawrence to Palk. 11 May 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 77

double walls, a deep moat, and an enclosed central point the commanded the green countryside for miles around.[67] Its impenetrability made it the ideal capital for Muhammad Ali during the war, but that very strength, combined with the wealth of the plains around it, instilled envy in enemies and allies alike. The Nawab rashly promised the fort to several of his country allies, intending all the while to retain control of the stronghold himself. Understandably angered by this dissembling, these allies began to turn against the Nawab even as the succession crisis still raged. Initially, the Madras Presidency attempted to ignore these diplomatic machinations, arguing, rather ironically given their existing commitments to Muhammad Ali's state, that "active involvement" in the question would "run the Risque of distressing the Company's Affairs and embroiling ourselves with the Government".[68]

As the months progressed and the Nawab was unable to extricate himself from these increasingly hostile disputes, the Madras Presidency reversed that initial conviction. Thomas Cooke was sent from Madras to patch up the crisis caused, in their minds, by Muhammad Ali's unnecessary stubbornness.[69] Cooke found the task as impossible as the Nawab had, but his superiors refused to consider failure an option, threatening to fire him in favor of a more skilled negotiator if he could not mend the rift.[70] Where before the presidency's political ambitions had been relatively moderate, mostly limited to interactions with the Karnatik's fiscal infrastructure, Cooke's mission marks a sea change in which the Company thrust itself headlong into the highest level of diplomatic politics in the Deccan. These negotiations brought the presidency into contact with South Asian polities it had previously encountered only in commercial contexts, and its desire to gain

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[67] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 182.
[68] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 10 Aug 1752. *DCB-MD-1752*, 31
[69] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 08 Sept 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 145
[70] Letter from Mil Dept to Thomas Cooke. 08 Oct 1753. Ibid., 162

diplomatic favor within these kingdoms in turn expanded the Company's military involvement in the subcontinent. The potential country allies with whom Cooke treated were eager to gain the same advantages Muhammad Ali had gleaned from the Company's army, and the ambitious Military Department met their requests for strategic support whenever possible.[71] Cooke's work at Tiruccirappalli thus not only paved the way for the Madras Presidency's emergence in the Karnatik as a one of the province's most influential political actors, but also furthered the influence of the Military Department within the presidency's administration by rendering it the foremost arm by which that diplomacy was conducted.

In 1753, the succession war that had served as backdrop for all these developments came to its gruesome conclusion. Chanda Sahib was apprehended near Tiruccirappalli by the Nawab's allies and decapitated only a few days later on 03 June.[72] His death did not result in immediate peace, the issue of ownership of Tiruccirappalli remaining a point of fierce disagreement, but the Court of Directors seized the news as an opportunity to force its servants back to their erstwhile commercial focus. Though Leadenhall Street in the 1740s had been enthusiastic about the Company's militarization, pouring soldiers, officers, and capital into the development of its army, by mid-century it began to balk at the expense, commitment, and lack of profit required by these conflicts. In 1750, upon hearing yet another request for more recruits, they refused point blank, responding curly that they could not "as a Trading Company support the expense of it".[73] As the Directors' assistance dwindled, the Madras Presidency, rather than slowing its militarization, turned

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[71] In 1753, for instance, the department sent soldiers to march with the Maratha general Balijirao as he attacked the French Compagnie. Letter from Mil Dept to Balijirao. 12 Feb 1753. Madras (India : State), *Country correspondence, Military Dept., 1753* (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1911), 16
[72] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 139.
[73] Bryant, "British logistics and the conduct of the Carnatic Wars (1746-1783).," 285.

to alternate sources of funding, often stealing bullion meant for other settlements, in 1753

detaining an entire ship and its cargo meant for Bengal.[74] The end of the Second Carnatic

War seemed to London the perfect moment to regain control over this runaway

militarization, and the men of Leadenhall Street furiously hammered out a treaty with the

French Compagnie banning the corporations from squaring off against each other in

regional wars and exhorting them to cultivate trade networks instead in their respective

settlements, the English in the Karnatik and the French in the interior Deccan, where they

had found support with the Nizam of Hyderabad. This treaty, reaching the settlements in

1755, failed to achieve its intended effect. The Madras Military Department was too

influential and too ambitious to be reined in by a piece of paper, and its servants simply

shifted their targets to concentrate on more local wars, specifically helping Muhammad

Ali to solidify his rule amongst the *palaiyakarars*.

Unlike the presidency's early expeditions to Pegu and Thanjavur, these

engagements were no longer considered subordinate operations. To reduce the ancient

stronghold of the Phousdar of Vellore in the north of the province Major James Kilpatrick

demanded a reinforcement of five hundred Europeans and fifteen hundred sepoys *in

addition to* the massive force he already maintained.[75] Despite Chanda Sahib's death in

1753, the annual minutes of the Military Department for the next three supposedly

peaceful years each took up substantially more room than had its combined records from

the Second Carnatic War. C. A. Bayly argues that the presidency retained an essentially

commercial focus until at least the 1780s, prizing fabric over soldiers, but it seems clear

that a sea change had swept through the Madras Presidency during the Second Carnatic

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[74] Minutes of the Ft. William Council. 23 July 1753. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings" (National Archives of India, 1753), 403
[75] Letter from Kilpatrick to Mil Dept. 20 Jan. 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 34.

War that shifted its institutional mentality at least temporarily towards a distinctly military focus that prized victories and military alliances over trade networks.[76] Local politicians, seeking to use the Company's growing strength to their own advantage, had induced and inspired the presidency to further the developments first necessitated by European hostilities in 1746. Only a decade after La Bourdonnais's attack, the Madras Presidency's sorry force had, through constant interaction with South Asian polities, grown into a military capable and *eager* to meet the Karnatik's strongest country troops in battle.

The Madras Military Revolution

By the time the Second Carnatic War drew to a close, the Madras Presidency was no longer, in any sense of the word, simply a trading corporation. True, some civilian-minded holdovers from days past remained in Fort St. George: the most spectacular example of these atavistic servants inarguably was Thomas Cooke, the beleaguered diplomat with the impossible task of diffusing the conflict for Tiruccirappalli. Though he had earlier served as the military paymaster at Fort St. David, that post had given him little of the martial spirit building elsewhere in the Company's leadership.[77] In a wonderfully colorful letter to the Military Department in 1753, he complained that his negotiations with commanders in the siege would probably end with "a random Shot" against which "I am to stand no better Chance than a Cow or Buffalo, for though I have the Advantage of them in reason it is far overballanc'd by the natural Shortness of my Sight".[78] These grumbles, though, are notable as exceptions. By 1753, the Madras Presidency was an institution directed by militarized men, whose opinion of themselves and their abilities in battle was far beyond Cooke's bovine levels. That inflated confidence

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[76] Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British Empire*, 60-1.
[77] General Letter to the Court of Directors. 11 Feb. 1749.*Despatches to England.*, II, 139.
[78] Letter from Thomas Cooke to Mil Dept. 03 Oct 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 159-60

had emerged over the course of the Second Carnatic War, as the Madras Presidency's military developed and matured into an effective fighting force. I will argue that this militarization was not simply the result of cannon, men, and officers exported from Europe: more fundamentally, it was a learning process in which those innovations and materiel taken from Britain had to be adapted to conform to and to exploit South Asian warfare.

Madras's militarization began immediately after La Bourdonnais's attack, as refugee servants making their way to Fort St. David scrambled to prevent another such disastrous siege. Many of their hasty projects in these heady months sought strictly, if incompletely, to borrow wholesale elements from Europe's military revolution. It cannot be denied that these innovations were in many cases quickly and astoundingly effective. The Battle of Adyar, in which Paradis's men demonstrated these new infantry tactics, so impressed South Asian observers that, in 1749, Muhammad Ali would tell Floyer that the loan of two gunners and two bombardiers would be "as 4000 sent to my assistance".[79] Still, for all these half-hyperbolized praises, the Madras Presidency's military did not instantly transform itself from a ragtag set of garrisons into a modernized and effective force capable of conquering the subcontinent. Both the full importation of the European military revolution and, more importantly, the adaptation of those innovations to a South Asian context required a longer period of warfare than the First Carnatic War offered. The coming of the Second Carnatic War, and the Madras Presidency's early decision to involve itself therein, thus provided a perfect "testing" ground for the Company's army and its officers to gain experience fighting specifically in a South Asian political and

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[79] Letter from Muhammad Ali Khan to Floyer. 04 Aug 1749. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 28.

ecological climate.

To most historians, following Geoffrey Parker's argument, the European military revolution manifested by the Madras Presidency in and of itself was sufficient to give the Company a unique and ultimately indomitable upper-hand in South Asia. P. J. Marshall describes the immediate effect of this transfer as simply "devastating" to country opponents, and, certainly, European tactics, strategies, and materiel proved essential to the presidency's military in the mid-eighteenth century and beyond.[80] War stores in particular gave the Madras Presidency an easy advantage against their opponents, whose own weapons could rarely match early modern European artillery. According to James P. Lawford, European cannon, where they could be acquired, could fire twice a minute when manned by an experienced crew, while South Asian guns at the beginning of the Carnatic Wars were liable to take ten minutes between shots.[81] British flintlock muskets were also held to be of a higher quality than their South Asian equivalents, rulers throughout the Karnatik scrambling to secure such pieces for themselves and for their troops. This simple technological advantage, perhaps even more than the ability of soldiers using it, proved a decisive factor in many engagements, including the Battle of Adyar, where rapid firepower more than made up for the Europeans' smaller numbers.

However quickly the Company's men could fire, this advantage alone was not enough to win every battle. Even as late as 1752, a company of soldiers fighting near Tiruccirappalli, though armed with the latest weaponry, fell into a chaotic rout when run down by an apparently drunk cavalry, resulting in what Captain Dalton claimed was "[t]he

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[80] Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 499.
[81] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 93.

bloodiest action…that I believe has ever been seen in this part of the world".[82] One of

Stringer Lawrence's most important reforms as the nominal "Father of the Indian Army"

lay in his efforts to train such panics out of his forces, to convince them to hold the line.

Michael Roberts, in his famous lecture first outlining the military revolution, cited this

discipline, secured through constant drill and training, as one of the defining

characteristics of the early modern infantry.[83] In Europe, the newfound order had allowed

infantries to adopt such tactics as volley-firing, whereby three rows of men would shoot

and reload in successive cycles so as to maintain a constant assault on the enemy.[84]

Although European forces in South Asia rarely could fill three lines, two-line volley-firing

proved immensely successful in battles such as Adyar.[85] Drill became an integral part of

the Madras Presidency's army, and its program, updated regularly to reflect the latest

advances among Europe's best infantries, was said to churn a raw recruit into a steady

infantryman in a few short weeks.[86] That soldier, whether off a ship from London or from

a village in the Karnatik, armed with a new gun and marching in formation, was an

incredibly formidable military opponent.

    Yet, if the military revolution proved crucial to the Madras Presidency's military

power, it was never designed to be a universally applicable blueprint for war. Orme,

writing in the eighteenth century, observed that "the modes of war in Indostan differ from

those in Europe" to such a degree that it was impossible to judge the two within the same

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[82] Quoted in Ibid., 148-9.

[83] Michael Roberts, "The Military Revolution, 1560-1660," in *The military revolution debate : readings on the military transformation of early modern Europe*, ed. Clifford Rogers (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 14-15.

[84] Parker, *The military revolution* , 19.

[85] G. J. Bryant, "Asymmetric Warfare: The British Experience in Eighteenth-Century India," *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 2 (April 2004): 455.

[86] T. A. Heathcote, *The military in British India : the development of British land forces in South Asia, 1600-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 29.

model.[87] Orme sought to excuse Clive's use of tactics that European commanders would likely have dismissed as too risky, but we can take his point even further: the differences between South Asia and Europe not only *permitted* "unorthodox" tactics, but actually necessitated them. Kaushik Roy argues that "the imported European way of warfare was inadequate to meet the varied demands of warfare and ecology in South Asia".[88] According to Roy, the Madras Presidency's success lay in the Balanced Military Synthesis it created "between the European elements of war and certain indigenous military techniques and…the natural, human, and animal resources of India".[89] The Madras Presidency was deeply engaged in a search for such a synthesis during the Carnatic Wars, using the conflicts not simply to export new guns and training manuals from London to form up a little Company army in imitation of its royal betters, but to improve that model. The wars incidentally provided Company commanders and soldiers the field experience they needed to learn what elements of their European model would be useful in South Asian wars and what should be altered for or borrowed from that geopolitical reality.

Inarguably, the most important difference between the Madras Presidency's army and its European counterparts came in the form of the sepoy revolution. Though the Company had always supplemented its meager European contingents with South Asians, those serving in the Madras Presidency before 1746 were unilaterally categorized as "peons", untrained men who were not integrated into the overall military structure and generally served as sentries or other lowly military duties. This "rabble", outfitted only with what weapons they could acquire for themselves, was considered a poor source of reinforcement in actual battle, as Morse discovered to his dismay when the bulk of his

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[87] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 192.
[88] Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia," 655.
[89] Ibid.

peons deserted at the first opportunity in 1746.[90] That same year, though, the Battle of Adyar also introduced onto the South Asian battlefield the first graduates of the French Comagnie's new recruiting system: the sepoy. Etymologically derived from the Persian "cipah" or "soldier", these sepoys had been trained and drilled in the European method and organized as an essential element in the battle's overall strategy. Fighting for the French, they proved as adept as their European counterparts in maintaining regular volleys against Mafuz Khan and in holding the line in the face of the massive army before them.

In the Carnatic Wars, in which both corporations desperately awaited each year a few dozen new soldiers from Europe, the Company could hardly ignore an innovation that opened up such a wide recruiting pool. The single-most important reform undertaken by the presidency in the immediate wake of Fort St. George's fall was the establishment of a sepoy corps in imitation of the French. Stringer Lawrence quickly took over sepoy training upon arriving at Cuddalore, and, by the time the Company marched against Pondicherry, its army contained 1100 "semi-trained" South Asian troops.[91] Yet, despite this crash-course military revolution, these hastily drilled and inexperienced soldiers "were still little better than the Company's peons", curtly dismissed by Lawrence as "dastardly dogs".[92] In the campaigns that followed, such a characterization became increasingly inapt, as both the sepoys' abilities and their officers' appreciation of the troops grew rapidly. By the end of the Second Carnatic War, the Company's sepoys would make up a highly effective body of troops capable of complex maneuvers on parade and in battle. A stunning example of this discipline can be found in Captain Dalton's night attack against the Dalavai of Mysore in 1753: his combined European and

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[90] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 29.
[91] Vigié, D*upleix,* 276.
[92] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 82; Bryant, "Indigenous mercenaries in the service of European imperialists," 11.

sepoy forces remained quiet enough in their long march that the enemy did not sound the alarm until they were within twenty yards of the first tents.[93] Defection and desertion among the sepoys further plummeted when, in conjunction with regular drill, the Madras Presidency increased the sepoys' salary to a wage slightly, but consistently, above that promised in other armies.[94] So delighted were most Company servants with these cheap, sturdy, and highly effective troops that, by the 1760s, they sometimes outnumbered their Western counterparts tenfold.[95]

At first glance, the sepoy revolution seems less an alteration to the military revolution than an extension of its innovations into a new demographic, but the Madras Presidency's development of this corps was intrinsically tied to the geographical context from which these recruits were taken. The Company never sought to create an exact match between its sepoys and its European infantrymen. This unwillingness to make a perfect mirror no doubt emanated in part from overt racism among Company servants. The segregating tradition that sepoy troops could only be drilled by a "Black Commandant" certainly had no rational military basis.[96] Yet other elements in the sepoys' training indicate that efforts were made to discover a strategic balance between the early modern European infantry and the military traditions of South Asia. In 1755, for instance, the sepoy troops were officially organized into a formal hierarchy in which South Asian ranks, such as *subedar*, *jemedar*, *havildar*, and *naik*, were substituted in the place of more European military titles.[97] Later in the century, we can see how the sepoys' military traditions could, in fact, halt intended reforms in their tracks. When the Madras

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[93] Minutes of the Military Department. 18 Aug. 1753. Madras (India : Presidency), *DCB-MD-1753*, 132.
[94] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 65.
[95] Bryant, "Indigenous mercenaries in the service of European imperialists," 5.
[96] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 63-4
[97] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 88.

Presidency sought to limit the civilians who followed its army, who in the past had

comprised a fully stocked, mobile marketplace, its officers found that the "Carnatic

sepoys had to be allowed the time-honoured privilege of taking their families with them",

something European troops were absolutely prohibited from doing.[98] Such examples

suggest that even the most important of the Madras Presidency's military reforms was not

simply a strict transfer of information off a Company ship, but rather a constant

negotiation between the demands of South Asian warfare and those selfsame pressures

coming from Europe.

Training its sepoys compelled the Madras Presidency to gain an understanding of

the culture from which their recruits came, but its army also had to adapt their military

model to contend with South Asia, and specifically the tropical Karnatik, as a *place*. Some

of these changes were merely logistical. For instance, soldiers in the early modern period

often draped the locks of the guns with a protective wax covering, but in 1756 Major

James Kilpatrick realized that this material melted quickly in the fierce Indian heat.[99] His

suggestion to provide soldiers with more permanent leather coverings was readily adopted

across the presidency. Such an easy fix, though, could not be found against all the

difficulties of South Asia's climate, and the monsoons in particular forced the Company

through a grim learning experience. These seasonal storms, striking the Karnatik both in

the early summer and in the late fall, were utterly unlike anything even veterans of

English and Scottish rain had ever experienced. In the presidency's early campaigns, the

military and civilian leadership had no comprehension of the effects the floods would

have on mobile armies in the field. Gunpowder was often the first casualty of the flooding,

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[98] Bryant, "Asymmetric Warfare," 463.
[99] Letter from James Kilpatrick to the Mil Dept. 17 Jan 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 24

and, after several experiences with drenched and useless artillery, Company officers such as Clive learned their lesson, carrying watertight tarps to cover their powder and shot on any mission that might be interrupted by the arrival of the rains.[100]

More tragically, and more inevitably, these floods were often attended with severe epidemics, striking down soldiers as they marched daily through high, warm water that served as a veritable paradise for mosquitoes and other disease carriers. Initially, the Military Department refused to accept that it would have to leave off campaigning twice a year to avoid the high mortality rates that accompanied these marches. Furious at what he considered an act of willful malevolence, Stringer Lawrence protested his orders in 1753 to remain with his men in the field throughout the rainy season:

> [T]hrough a Pique to me and for no other Reason…the Poor Soldiers, these brave Troops that have surmounted so many Difficulties…have been expos'd to all the Inclemencies of a Monsoon when they were useless…My Heart now bleeds to think that I could not redress the People's just Grievances.[101]

Such disasters taught Company officers to avoid the rains at all costs. In fact, Clive's decision to attack Sirajuddaula at Plassey may have been at least partially motivated by his fear that any delay would force him to give up his campaign prematurely to escape the quickly approaching monsoon.[102]

The Carnatic Wars provided Company officers with a wealth of experiences encouraging and guiding them as they adjusted their military expectations to a more South Asian context, but the conflicts also provided an unparalleled opportunity to "try out" strategies and tactics against many opponents, especially as the war expanded around the base of Tiruccirappalli. The theoretical innovations of the military revolution tended to

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[100] Letter from Lawrence to the Mil Dept. 03 Jan. 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 6 and Michael. Edwardes, *The Battle of Plassey and the conquest of Bengal.* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1963), 145
[101] Letter from Lawrence to the Mil Dept. 03 Jan 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 6
[102] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 100

assume that the war in question would take place between two armies funded and

organized by relatively monolithic, centralized states drawn from essentially the same

martial mold. Circumstances in South Asia, especially in the fragmented Deccan, were

decidedly different. In the fierce fighting around the Nawab's stronghold, for instance, the

Company's long supply trains were often harried not by large standing armies, but by the

Kallars, small, independent war chieftains from Mysore. Dirks has shown how these

attacks convinced the Madras Presidency to modify its logistics to adopt increasingly

compact and well-guarded supply trains when the threat of such a raid was present.[103]

Similarly, the Company tried whenever possible to march with hired South Asian

cavalrymen who could provide on-the-spot defense against such attacks and could chase

down the raiders after any assault.

As the presidency grew adept at defending against such attacks, its officers learned

simultaneously to exploit their opponents' weaknesses in the field. Lawrence, for instance,

much preferred skulking night attacks to the open, drummed-up battles stereotypical to the

eighteenth century, these covert assaults pitting his men against South Asian sentries,

which he along with many of his fellows considered incapable.[104] Orme, writing of Clive,

defended his unusual strategies by noting that, if they failed to conform to the expectations

of educated European officers, they were quite appropriate in the Karnatik regional

context. Clive made much use of the fact that most South Asian infantrymen in the early

Carnatic Wars were little different from the peons of the Company's garrisons. Though, as

we shall see, this demographic was swiftly changing, Clive found a temporary advantage

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[103] Dirks, *The hollow crown* , 193
[104] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 144, 92. Lawford cites R. O. Cambridge, an eighteenth-century historian, who claimed that most South Asian armies slept entirely without guards. See page 92 of the same source. Though this claim is, of course, quite dubious, the success of the Madras Presidency's night attacks during the Second Carnatic War suggest that the sentries' vigilance in many such camps left something to be desired.

in many battles by striking at the weak bonds of loyalty and discipline holding these

armies together, often instigating mass panic. As Henry Dodwell argues, these untrained

infantries, like Dalton's panicked men in 1752, were highly vulnerable to rapid

disintegration when faced with a sudden, incautious charge from their opponents, and

most of Clive's early victories came from such desertions.[105] Quickly, armies in the

Karnatik adapted measures against such gambits, the strategy's heyday passing soon after

its appearance, but for a time the phenomenon gave Clive an easy path to much of his

fame in the Karnatik.

In 1753, in the aftermath of Chanda Sahib's execution, Muhammad Ali

demonstrated that, just as the Madras Presidency's military had become increasingly a

part of the region in which it fought, its men were increasingly identified by others as

members of the South Asian military landscape. Muhammad Ali expressed his

gratefulness to Clive, who had been the field commander for the Company in many of the

Nawab's most important battles, in a way that treated him more as a South Asian than a

Briton. Following a tradition established by Muzaffar Jang, a brief-lived Nizam of

Hyderabad who had ennobled Dupleix and his general Bussy, Muhammad Ali decreed

that Clive would be henceforth known by the title Nawab Sabut Jang Bahadur, "firm in

war", thus placing the Englishman securely within the political and military hierarchy of

the Karnatik Nawab's court.[106] Abdul Majed Khan writes that this award rendered Clive

"no Englishmen as we might understand the term", but instead someone who had been

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[105] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 86.
[106] For translation, see appendix of Great Britain. and John Burgoyne, "Fifth Report from the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Nature, State, and Condition of the East India Company, and of the British Affairs in the East Indies.," in , ed. Sheila Lambert, vol. 135 (Wilmington Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1975), 553

initiated into the political and military social structure of South Asia.[107]

      Clive's experiences in the Second Carnatic War had not only taught him how battles and campaigns could be fought in that context, but had also inculcated in him a desire to expand his power in that sphere of influence. Already by 1751, this imperial eagerness had begun to infect many in the Madras Presidency, its leadership boasting to the Court of Directors that "any European nation, resolved to war on them [Mughal states], with a tolerable force, may over-run their whole country".[108] The presidency's increased political involvement in the Karnatik, though born from quests for profit and trade, had kindled in many a newfound certainty that this interference was right. As the Second Carnatic War drew to a close, the warmongers of the Madras Presidency were outfitted with the motives, the abilities, and the justifications needed to bring their imperial desires into being. All they lacked was an opening to bring those ambitions to bear.

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[107] Abdul Majed Khan, "Introduction: The Twilight of Mughal Bengal," in *The eighteenth century in Indian history : evolution or revolution?*, ed. P. J. Marshall (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 366.
[108] Letter to the Court of Directors. 06 Aug 1751. "East India Series 1," 15

CHAPTER THREE
The Second India: Business in Bengal

Introduction

On 07 June 1756, one thousand miles away from the ambitions and artillery of the

Madras Presidency, tucked away in the northeast corner of South Asia, another of the

Company's administrative councils was coming to order in Bengal. The meeting

convened in the Bengal Presidency's headquarters, Fort William of Calcutta, a square,

squat fortress commanded on all sides by countless warehouses and merchant homes.[1]

From their vantage point, through windows cut in the fort's already thin walls, the

councilmen could see the usually bustling road of the Hugli River, that great artery of

European trade in Bengal. A Company writer, a young boy of fifteen or sixteen just

starting out his career in South Asia, stood ready to add the meeting's minutes to the

presidency's proceedings, an archive bursting with arguments about the quality of silk and

the cost of rice. Today, though, Roger Drake, president at Fort William, had before him an

agenda that differed radically from those quotidian commercial concerns. News had come

that the just inaugurated Nawab, Sirajuddaula (r. 1756-1757) had set his sights on Calcutta

and intended to "expel [the English] totally out of [his] country".[2] For a presidency that,

unlike its counterpart in Madras, had spent the last decades in almost completely non-

militarized trade and politics, this was a terrifying prospect, one for which Drake was as

unprepared as Morse had been against La Bourdonnais in 1746.

Nevertheless, just as Morse had done his best in doomed Fort St. George, now

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[1] In fact, when the fortress had been built at the turn of the eighteenth century, the men on the spot had explicitly sought to make it as militarily nonthreatening as possible. M Augustine, *Fort William : Calcutta's crowning glory*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Ocean Books, 1999), 58
[2] Letter from Sirajuddaula to Kwaja Wajid. 28 May 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 4.

Drake was determined to make what preparations he could for the siege.[3] Though Drake

certainly knew of Madras's military developments, at no point in his tenure as president at

Fort William had he sought to imitate that model, preferring instead to maintain the

presidency's traditional focus on trade and to expand upon its role as a civil official in the

Bengal state. Forced suddenly to transition from textiles to siege works, the presidency did

what it could with the knowledge and tools at its disposal. In the meeting room at Fort

William, it occurred to one councilmen that the many windows dotting the fortress's walls

should probably be barricaded before the Nawab's arrival, but, as sound as his logic was,

the solution the fabric-mongers devised, to stuff the openings full of highly flammable

cotton bales, left something to be desired.[4] Another suggested leveling the houses around

the fort to eliminate hiding places for snipers and artillery, but the council could not bring

itself to lose their homes even against this palpable threat.[5] Without a mature military or

even the basic knowledge of how to weather an assault, the Bengal Presidency had little

hope against Sirajuddaula's army, numbering in the tens of thousands, and the fort fell

after only three days of siege on 20 June 1756.

      The startling rapidity of the Bengal Presidency's defeat is clear proof that the Fort

William Council had nowhere near the military talent and ability pervading the Madras

Presidency by 1756. This sense of divergence is only heightened when one notes that,

only a year after the siege, Clive would campaign in Bengal against the same army that

conquered Fort William, enjoying easy victories at almost every step along his mission to

overthrow Sirajuddaula. What can account for the massive discrepancy in military power

gaping between the two presidencies by 1756? One cannot argue that the Bengal

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[3] Captain Alexander Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Ibid., 76.
[4] Letter from Watts and Collett to Court of Directors. 16 July 1756. National Archives of India., Bengal (India), and East India Company., *FWIHC*, 1017.
[5] Captain Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 76.

Presidency was ignorant of the reforms taking place in the Carnatic Wars: conversely, the

Court of Directors had periodically sent engineers and officers from Madras to effect a

similar militarization in Bengal, but these efforts had come to naught.[6] Traditionally,

scholars have assumed that the weakness of the Bengal Presidency in June 1756

represented a massive failure for the Fort William Council. S. C. Hill captures this

sentiment in his seminal work on the subject, suggesting that the presidency was run by

"the most incompetent of leaders", who, "vacillating and uncertain, could not provide

even for the necessities of the day".[7] This chapter will argue that, if the fort was badly

defended in 1756, this was not the result of mere incompetence: it was the product of a

long-term institutional mentality that, for decades, resisted militarization in favor of more

prudent and profitable ventures in trade and civil politics.

Implicit in Hill's accusations is the assumption that the Madras Presidency's

militarized outlook was universally accepted as the "desirable" model of business for

Company administrations and that the Bengal Presidency's failure to copy that method

was nothing short of willful ineptitude. More recently, B. K. Gupta has used a similar

argument to explain why Sirajuddaula mounted his attack in the first place, suggesting

that the men of Fort William, jealous of the growing military and political power wielded

by their southern counterparts, strove to develop a pseudo-imperial arrogance of their own

without taking the time to add any substance to their bluff.[8] Both interpretations assume

that the council at Fort William looked, or at any rate *should* have looked, to Madras for

its behavioral and operational cues. In fact, the reality that allowed the militarization of

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[6] One such engineer, Colonel Caroline Fredrick Scott, arrived in Calcutta on 07 Sept 1753 and proceeded to make major recommendations regarding the fortification and organization of the presidency's military, all of which the council ignored after his death in 1755. Arrival date from Minutes of the Fort William Council. 07 Sept. 1753. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "PP 1753," 494

[7] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, xl and cxxv.

[8] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 37.

the Madras Presidency was one unique to the Karnatik and shared little with the reality

servants faced on the Hugli River. First, the Bengal Presidency had not suffered the trade

setbacks that damaged revenues in the Karnatik after the First Carnatic War, and so there

was no need to experiment with dodgy schemes of mercenary wages and militarized trade.

Second and more importantly, the Bengali Nawab Alivardi Khan (r. 1739-1756) enjoyed

sufficient centrality and stability that his prohibitions against European militarization,

unlike those of Anwaruddin, proved a palpable discouragement to any such schemes.[9]

Throughout his reign, the men of Calcutta saw militarization not only as an unnecessary

and costly gamble, but also one that was likely to bring them into unwinnable conflict

against a powerful head of state.

To militarize would have set the Bengal Presidency against and outside of the

highly stable and highly profitable economic and political structures with which it

interacted and at worst might even have led to their complete expulsion from those rich

realms. Thus, instead of trading away its bullion for bullets, Fort William actively sought

to carve out an alternate role for its servants that allowed it to integrate more completely,

and accordingly more profitably, into that system. By the middle of the century, the

Bengal Presidency was playing an important role not only as a major mercantile force in

the province's economy, but had become a part of the Bengali governmental system,

serving as official *zamindar* of Calcutta, a landlord that served as a local expression of the

Nawab's government in Murshidabad. This growing participation in regional government

suggests that the Bengal Presidency was interested in developing and expanding beyond

traditional methods of operation, but that militarization was not considered before 1756 as

a fruitful option in those developments.

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[9] Ibid., 28.

This apparent commitment to a non-militaristic outlook naturally begs the question why the men of Fort William were attacked in 1756. Imperial scholars could find no rationality in Sirajuddaula's assault, and nineteenth-century Britons often held up the siege as a battle cry of imperial justification, an utterly heinous act of war by an evil tyrant against a previously peaceful corporation of traders.[10] Central to this myth was the much-told tale of the Black Hole of Calcutta, in which 123 Company servants purportedly suffocated after Sirajuddaula's men stuffed the 146 survivors of the siege into a single prison cell to weather the hot summer night.[11] In recent generations, this supposed "tragedy" has been recast as almost pure fiction imagined by a pathological liar, and scholars have sought a more concrete explanation for the siege than Oriental "despotism", generally depicting Sirajuddaula's attack as just deserts against an arrogant group of would-be imperialists.[12] Gupta, for instance, argues the Bengal Presidency's "open defiance" of the Nawab brought it inevitably into conflict with the state.[13] In either the traditional account or Gupta's revision, the siege represents a sea change in the Company's relationship with the Bengali ruler, the result of an old amicability disintegrating.

I will argue, though, that the Company's actions in 1756 and the consequences thereof do not represent such a break, either in the Bengal Presidency's relationship with the state or in its ultimate objectives in those interactions. Instead, I will present the

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[10]Sirajuddaula is described as "delight[ing] in the sadistic pleasure of witnessing the torture of men" in Augustine, *Fort William*, 66

[11] The main account of this tale comes from a pamphlet published by J. H. Z. Holwell, a self-proclaimed survivor of the Hole. J Holwell, *A genuine narrative of the deplorable deaths of the English gentlemen, and others, who were suffocated in the Black-Hole in Fort-William, at Calcutta, in the Kingdom of Bengal, in the night succeeding* (London: A. Millar, 1758).

[12] B. K. Gupta shows that no more than sixty four men were in the "hole", and most of the dead (numbering between eighteen and forty-three) sported wounds from the siege itself. See Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 77-8

[13] Ibid., 37.

conflict as a continuation of the Bengal Presidency's participation within the state at Murshidabad, its disobedience of the Nawab merely a miscalculated gamble intended to expand its power, not as an imperial actor, but as a *zamindar* and Sirajuddaula's subsequent attack just a successful articulation of sovereignty against a local lord. Unlike Clive, who sought empire *over* Bengal, Roger Drake, and his colleagues agitated for more power *within* it, their actions conforming far more closely to the revolts of South Asian lords against Mughal emperors than they do with the Company's later imperial quests. The brief battle that took place between European and South Asian troops in the shadow of Fort William in June 1756 thus can only be understood when those geographic categories are dropped: this was a battle between a Bengali Nawab and his rebellious subjects.

A "Failure" to Militarize

Imperial historians levying an accusation of incompetence against the Bengal Presidency did not have to look far for apparent evidence of this ineptitude. Many of the men in Fort William and its surrounding settlements proved themselves in 1756 even more militarily incapable and unfortunate than Morse and his officers had been at Fort St. George a decade before. The first of the Company's holdings in Sirajuddaula's path was a small factory at Kasimbazar, only a day's march from his capital at Murshidabad. Company servants there turned over the keys to the armory without firing a shot, their chief, William Watts, terrified that a prolonged bombardment might harm his pregnant wife.[14] Drake and the councilmen actually stationed in Fort William, for all their meetings and attempted preparation, lost their nerve as army reached their gates. On the night of 19

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[14] Edwardes, *The Battle of Plassey and the conquest of Bengal.*, 35.

June, the vast bulk of the Council abandoned the fort, Roger Drake dodging bullets fired

by his own men as he fled Calcutta in the last available boat.[15] With so many instances of

apparent cowardice, it is unsurprising that for the fort's survivors, encamped in the

marshes near the fishing village of Fulta, the first order of business lay in finding a

scapegoat for this defeat. These accusations took precedence over all other considerations,

essentially preventing the rump of the Council from undertaking any meaningful

business.[16] Particularly common was the charge was that the leaders of Fort William had

approached the fort's military preparations with a negligence bordering on the criminal for

years before Sirajuddaula's attack.[17]

These heated accusations serve as the foundation for Hill's assumption that

incompetence led to Fort William's defeat. Basing one's argument on condemnations

made in the immediate aftermath of such a disaster is, at best, a dubious prospect.

Nevertheless, stepping back from Fulta, one can find some evidence for these charges of

neglect in letters and records penned before the siege. A particularly striking instance of

military negligence plagued the fort's military inventory, a task supposedly maintained by

the presidency's Military Storekeeper, Thomas Coales.[18] Each month, a Company writer

dutifully inscribed in the Public Proceedings that Coales had laid his report on the fort's

materiel before the Council, and the storekeeper was often given thousands of rupees to

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[15] Letter from the French Compagnie at Chandernagore. 03 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 50.
[16] Watts and Collett, for instance, taking refuge with the French at Chandernaggar, wrote angrily to Drake that "after your Honour…had quitted Fort William, which still held out, your power as a Governour…from that moment ceased". Watts and Collett to Fulta Council. 08 July 1756. Ibid., 61
[17] See, for instance, Alexander Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756 or William Tooke's account. 04 Oct to 11 Oct 1756. Both in Ibid., 74, 278 See also Letter from Holwell to Court of Directors. 30 Nov. 1756. *FWIHC*, 1066-1067
[18] Coales is named to the post in Minutes of the Fort William Council. 09 Aug. 1753. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "PP 1753."

replenish those stores as necessary.[19] Apparently, though, Coales was not the most

thorough of bookkeepers. As the fort scrambled to prepare for a siege in 1756, servants

discovered that most of the cannon along the fort's walls were utterly useless, rendered

inoperable by rotten or broken carriages. Few carpenters answered the Company's

desperate call for emergency work, as most of Calcutta's population had by that point

already taken to the hills to escape the coming battle.[20] Worse still, as Drake would learn

some days into the attack, Coales had failed to note that the vast bulk of the fort's

supposedly plentiful gunpowder had been breached by the damp.[21] Clearly, some of the

difficulties that Fort William faced in 1756 were the result of long-term negligence on the

part of its military administration.

Coales's apparent neglect, though, begs explanation. Why was so incapable a

storekeeper allowed to maintain such a long tenure in such a vital post? The Madras

Presidency would have been less likely to accept that ineptitude. In April 1753, the same

month in which Coales received his position, the Madras Military Department called

Captain Dalton to task for failing to complete the inventory of Tiruccirappalli's supplies,

ignoring Dalton's excuses that he had been distracted from the task by the desperate siege

unfurling around the fort. [22] That the Bengal Presidency had not exerted similar oversight

requires a more detailed explanation than Hill's blanket proclamation of incompetence. In

fact, the Bengal Presidency's administrative structure was organized in such a way almost

to invite these problems. Though the Madras Presidency had created a separate Military

Department to concern itself with such questions as war stores, the Bengal Presidency had

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[19] As late as 02 Feb 1756, only four months before the siege, Coales was given 3,000 rupees (about 300 pounds) to replenish the fort's military stores. See Minutes of the Fort William Council. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings" (National Archives of India, 1756), 679

[20] Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 76.

[21] William Tooke to the Fulta Council. 10 Nov 1756. Ibid., 289.

[22] Letter from Mil Dept to Dalton. 14 April 1753. Madras (India : Presidency), *DCB-MD-1753*, 59.

no comparable institution. Indeed, the army itself barely had an official framework. The Council did not hand out officer commissions until only a few days before Sirajuddaula's attack, and even then ranks had more to do with civil seniority than military talent or experience.[23] If "incompetence" allowed Sirajuddaula's victory, the ineptitude could not have been an immediate phenomenon, but must have existed for at least a decade, preventing and subverting attempts in Calcutta to develop a military institution along the lines of that created in the Karnatik.

Rather than asking what the Fort William Council *neglected* to do in this decade, though, I argue that a more useful lens by which the presidency can be understood is one that focuses on the policies it developed in the period parallel to the Madras Presidency's militarization. Hill's explanation would cast the council as passive and incapable imitators of their southerly counterparts, desiring, but ultimately unable, to follow their lead. Alternatively we can view the servants of Calcutta as creators and proponents of their own model of business, one that existed and developed in direct contradiction to that prevailing in Fort St. George. Specifically, this model eschewed militarization in favor of commercialization, an operational focus that held "that every rupee expended on military services was esteemed so much lost to the Company" and that often spent twenty times as much on commercial investments than military expenses.[24] So adamant was the presidency in these priorities that, in 1753, when the superintendant of the marine asked for weights to anchor two buoys, the council instructed him to sink of two of their older six pounders—preferring to lose these essentially irreplaceable guns than to part with any

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[23] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, lxvii.
[24] Quote in Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Ibid., 74 According to the Public Proceedings, in November 1752, the presidency spent 8500 Rs on "Charges Merchandise", but only 376 Rs on "Charges Military". Minutes of the Fort William Council. 24 Jan 1753. "PP 1753," 50

of their potentially profitable scrap metal.[25] Such anecdotes indicate that Fort William did

not just blindly neglect military concerns. Its leaders actively rejected those developments

in favor of maintaining their identity as traders in the face of Madras's transformation.

This divergence in policy and in objective created new hostility between servants

in Madras and Bengal. Though communication between the two presidencies was

infrequent, those letters that did make the journey were filled with competition and

disagreement, a particular sticking point lying in the disbursement of bullion sent out from

London. Madras's geographic position on the eastern coast meant that ships invariably

stopped first at its settlements before making the long journey northward. The council

there felt no compunction about raiding the stores meant for their colleagues, stealing

soldiers, officers, and whatever treasure they considered necessary for their own ends. In

1748, certain that they had been shortchanged, the Fort William Council complained

angrily that Fort St. David "reserved more to themselves than was absolutely Necessary

for the Expenses of their Garrison which they thought deserved to be maintained at about

any Charge".[26] In revenge, the Bengal Presidency effectively stole markets out of

Madras's jurisdiction, expanding its trade into the northern reaches of the Coromandel

Coast to indignant protests from the south.[27] Tellingly, Fort William did not object when

the Madras Presidency waylaid soldiers bound for its settlements and even jumped at the

opportunity to send one of the few battalions that had made it to Calcutta, a contingent of

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[25] Minutes of the Fort William Council. 12 April 1753. Ibid., 198.

[26] Letter from Fort St. David. Entered into record 23 Feb 1747/8. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "Public Proceedings 1748-1751," 4.

[27] The Fort William Council justified this by explaining that the Madras Presidency's wars left these markets under-utilized. The servants had tried to follow Company protocol by sending surplus goods to Madras for sale there, but "our Goods have remained unsold for 4 or 5 year past, when at other Ports our Ships have met with an Immediate Sale for them". Minutes of the Fort William Council. 29 Nov. 1753. "PP 1753," 417.

Swiss mercenaries, back to Madras.[28] The contrast between the presidency's anger at

losing bullion and relief losing troops indicates that, while the Bengal Presidency was

eager to expand commercially, it had no interest in catalyzing such a growth in its army.

Significantly, though, that policy of non-militarization represented an active

rejection of Madras. The Fort William Council openly disobeyed even those directives

from Leadenhall Street to improve its army and its fortifications. After La Bourdonnais's

attack on Fort St. George in 1746, the Court of Directors was desperate to prevent another

such disaster and hurriedly funneled money and manpower to the Madras Presidency to

help it scrape together an answering force in the Karnatik. Several envoys were sent to

Bengal to help settlements there begin similar processes, focusing especially on bringing

their fortifications up to modern standards. One such engineer, Batholomew Plaisted,

actually drew up plans to strengthen Fort William, but these were rejected by the council

as overly militaristic and threatening.[29] Accordingly, the next engineer, Colonel Scott,

who was assigned in 1753 to make a grand tour of all the Company's forts, was given the

power to demand reforms, but he died before ground could be struck on his ambitious

project. His replacement, appointed by the Fort William Council itself, determined that

Scott's blueprints had been needlessly wasteful.[30] Rather than forging ahead with the

project, the Council delayed, asking the Court of Directors to approve the revisions,

thereby buying a full year's reprieve before undertaking such a costly and, in its mind,

unnecessary expenditure.[31] Further red tape extended these delays such that only the most

minor improvements had been made by June 1756.

Similar bureaucratic obstructions undercut the Court of Directors' efforts to

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[28] Minutes of the Fort William Council. 11 Jan. 1753. Ibid., 9.
[29] Bartholomew Plaisted, "The Original Plan of Fort William" (Calcutta, 1747), Victoria Memorial Hall.
[30] Letter from Simpson to the Fort William Council. 26 Feb 1756. *FWIHC*, 1000
[31] Letter from the Fort William Council to the Court of Directors. 23 Feb 1756. Ibid., 992.

establish a standing military force in Bengal. In 1752, the Directorate ordered the Bengal

Presidency to organize a militia in Calcutta, nominally to serve as protection against

attack by the French at Chandernaggar.[32] Fort William at first seemed ready to obey,

writing on 18 September 1752 that George Minchin had been named captain commandant

of the militia and that he planned "as soon as the weather sets in a little more temperate, to

fix and appoint proper serjeants [sic] and corporals out of the military for instructing…the

inhabitants".[33] In 1756, though, the Directors discovered that no militia had ever

materialized.[34] They immediately wrote an angry letter demanding redress, but this

missive did not arrive in Bengal until Fort William had already been lost. When Drake

finally mustered his "militia" in 1756, only five hundred men, mostly *topasses,* or half-

Portuguese Indians, could be found.[35] While in the Karnatik impressive victories had been

won even with such limited numbers, these men were poor alternatives to the disciplined

infantries of the south: Holwell would later report that "few…knew the right from wrong

end of their pieces".[36] The men of Fort William were not simply indifferent to schemes of

militarization. They used the power and autonomy of their positions in the Council to

undercut and to obstruct demands by their employers to adopt such military measures.

It would be a mistake to write off these actions as mere "incompetence". The

Bengal Presidency's policy of non-militarization was an active process, an ideology and

long-term institutional mentality that increasingly isolated servants in Fort William not

only from their counterparts in Madras, but also from the expectations and desires of the

metropole. Colonel Scott discovered this determination to his chagrin when he attempted,

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[32] Order referred to in Letter from Court of Directors to Fort William Council. 11 Feb. 1756. National Archives of India., Bengal (India), and East India Company., *FWIHC vII*, 162.
[33] Letter from Fort William Council to the Court of Directors. 18 Sept. 1752. *FWIHC*, 607-8.
[34] Letter from Court of Directors to Fort William. 11 Feb. 1756. *FWIHC vII*, 162.
[35] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 61.
[36] Letter from Holwell to the Court of Directors.*FWIHC*, 1066.

in addition to his futile plans to refortify Calcutta, to "introduce Regular Order and Discipline among the Troops" in Bengal: as his underling would later complain, his work ran up against "too much power and self Interest" in the council to make any headway.[37] Not content simply to neglect military matters, Drake and many others on the Council worked furiously to ensure that these operations remained insignificant. What could have motivated these men to put so much work into a policy that, in hindsight, seems responsible for their own destruction? Hill and other scholars working from an essentially Eurocentric lens can provide no other explanation than insanity or ineptitude. If, though, we shift our focus away from the presidency's interactions with European entities and turn instead to its involvement in the Bengal state, a different interpretation appears. In the context of that province, as the Bengal Presidency became an increasingly active participant in its stable government and vibrant economy, the prospect of militarization for the men of Fort William appeared not simply as a wasteful venture, but explicitly contrary to their interests and to their continued existence in that province.

"The Paradise of Provinces"

When the Bengal Presidency is perceived in this milieu, as much a part of the Bengal province as it was a branch of Europe far from home, the persistence of Fort William's non-militarization becomes immediately more comprehensible. English Company servants throughout South Asia in the eighteenth century, in the face of the regionalization taking place across the subcontinent, sought in each of their respective settlements to reconstruct their own roles in this newly diverse political landscape. In the Madras Presidency, especially after the First Carnatic War, servants found their interests

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[37] Letter from Noble to Mil Dept. 22 Sept. 1756. Madras (India : Presidency), *DCB-MD-1756*, 286.

best served by interacting with regional powers in their newfound capacity as a military power, as mercenaries, as allies, or as opponents. In Bengal, though, domestic economic and political realities made such an arrangement vanishingly improbable. Instead, servants in that northern presidency found their interests and ambitions best served by seeking integration into the wider Bengali economy and civil administration and by actively refusing any military involvement in that system.

Three developments in the Bengal state and economy served to strengthen the presidency's commitment to a commercial focus. The first of these simply lay in the vibrancy of Calcutta's trade and the volume of profits Fort William managed to accrue therein. Where the Madras Presidency had seen its revenue badly damaged in the First Carnatic War, the Bengal Presidency experienced no comparable disruptions, and its hugely successful annual trade amounted to more than three-fifths of the Company's total profit by the mid-eighteenth century, its imports sent back to London outstripping those of the Madras Presidency regularly by a factor of four.[38] With this commercial model of operation still fulfilling the servants' needs and expectations, there was no reason why the Fort William Council should have shifted its budget towards something as uncertain as the experimental militarization the men of Madras funded in desperation. Second and more importantly, the relatively centralized and stable province of Bengal lacked the manifold political openings that had allowed even a small and inexperienced army to intervene in the Karnatik. Rather than risking military involvement on a larger scale, the Bengal Presidency found a securer source of revenue by taking up a position as a local *zamindar*, a tax collector and civil authority. In this role lies the third factor lobbying against Fort

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[38] P. J. Marshall, *Trade and conquest : studies on the rise of British dominance in India* (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Brookfield, Vt., USA : Variorum, 1993), 24. Appendix 5: Statistical Tables. "Imports from Asia". Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 510.

William's militarization: by becoming a *zamindar*, the Bengal Presidency developed an active stake in the stability of the provincial government. Its interests, both in terms of trade profit and local power, were better served by participating in that state structure than by developing militaristic and imperial aims subverting it.

Where the Madras Presidency's experience in the mid-eighteenth century had been overwhelming characterized by the need to recoup revenue lost in the wake of the First Carnatic War, the Bengal Presidency suffered no such economic setbacks. The Bengal state itself was one of the richest and most prosperous trading hubs in South Asia, prompting contemporary Persian chroniclers to label it the "Paradise of Provinces".[39] Massive amounts of bullion were injected into its economy, permitting a stunning 186% growth in Bengali exports in the first half of the century.[40] Fort William, situated on the Hugli River in the midst of this bustling wealth, was well-suited to take advantage of this massive expansion, and its shipments back to London doubled from around 200,000 pounds per year in the 1720s to over 400,000 the 1740s.[41] In the 1750s, though, this growth was threatened by an unexpected difficulty: a shortage of bullion needed to purchase these goods.[42] This looming crisis pushed the Bengal Presidency even more deeply into the Bengal trade network. Desperate to maintain its revenues, the Fort William Council became increasingly reliant on long-term contracts with local merchants, directly contravening orders from the Court of Directors, which preferred to operate on a cash-and-carry basis more disconnected from the vagaries of the local economy.[43] In this

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[39] Persian sources cited in Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 18.
[40] Ibid., 71.
[41] Appendix 5: Statistical Tables. "Imports from Asia". Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 508-510.
[42] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 16.
[43] Arguments for continued vibrancy of the Bengal economy and Company's difficulties therein in Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 22-23. The Company became so desperate to make trade agreements in

fragile context, the Fort William Council was hardly likely to spend its already scarce capital on a military model of dubious profitability that was sure to drive away existing trade contractors.

Nevertheless, if this trade helps to explain the Fort William Council's military miserliness, the adamancy with which the council refused its orders to militarize suggests that something deeper discouraged them from conforming to London's desires. The presidency's refusal to militarize was motivated as much by their interactions with the Bengali political state as by their integration into its economy. Imperialist historians have long been confounded by Bengal, the "Paradise of Provinces" seemingly contradicting the myth of the Dark Century. Accordingly, scholars in this tradition tend to depict Bengal as an aberration, an economic accident within an atmosphere of political oppression: I. B. Watson writes that "Bengal was the only region in India rich enough to permit the anarchy then obtaining and still hold out the opportunity for trade and fortune".[44] Such claims could not be more wrongheaded: Bengal's eighteenth-century growth occurred not *in spite of* the Nawabs, but to a great extent because of their support. Murshid Quli Khan founded one of the most successful Mughal "successor states", providing a vibrant landscape not only for domestic merchants, but also for traders seeking an alternative to the unstable imperial center. One such migrant, Omichand, left Agra's faltering markets to relocate to Calcutta, where he became one of the Company's foremost contractors and where his lifestyle "resembled more the state of a prince than the condition of a merchant".[45] Throughout his reign, Murshid Quli Khan was eager to ensure that his administration

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the 1750s that, in 1753, the Bengal Presidency posted an open notice on Fort William's front door reading "we are willing to Contract with any one of reasonable terms". Minutes of Fort William Council. 23 June 1753. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "PP 1753," 335

[44] Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire: English Private Trade in India, 1659-1760* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), 293.

[45] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 50.; Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 124-5.

backed such mercantile expansion, and the Company found an essential and profitable

role in that growing economy.[46]

Murshid Quli Khan's love of merchants extended beyond tax revenue. He was

determined to use their strength and wealth to increase the stability and centrality of his

government throughout Bengal. In the first chapter, we saw that Murshid Quli Khan's

fiscal and political acumen, specifically his ability to increase taxes remitted to Delhi,

allowed him to carve out an essentially autonomous kingdom in Bengal without risking

the sort of independence wars Nizam ul-Mulk faced in the early eighteenth century.

Merchants were an integral part of the Nawab's tax reforms, especially in their capacity as

moneylenders and guarantors of payment for *zamindari* short on liquid cash.[47] By the time

Alivardi Khan declared Bengal officially independent in 1739, judging that Nader Shah's

raid on Delhi had removed the last vestiges of imperial authority, the Nawab found

himself presiding over a rich and effective fiscal state enjoying solid assurances from the

province's largest merchants that his nobility would pay their massive taxes.[48]

This political security had important consequences limiting the opportunities for

the English Company's militarization. In the Deccan, Nizam ul-Mulk's continued troubles

with the center and with external threats against his sovereignty prevented him from

solidifying local loyalty to his rule, allowing small, but highly independent states to

persist throughout the region supposedly under his control. Where the Nizam had

contended with limited resources against *palaiyakarars* ensconced in virtually

impenetrable natural fortresses among craggy cliffs and rocky hills, the Nawabs of Bengal

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[46] Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700-1740," 804.
[47] Ibid., 803-4.
[48] The Bengal state did not just enjoy yearly taxes from these merchants, but actually received massive cash loans from them. In the first half of the century, it was reported that the Jagat Seth family often granted the government immediate liquid loans of hundreds of thousands of rupees on demand. Little, "The House of Jagat Seth," 104.

brought a much stronger, undistracted government to bear against recalcitrant *zamindari*, themselves unable to mount an effective resistance from the province's flat marshes. Throughout Mughal history, power relationships between a *zamindar* and his regional superior had been colored with mutual competition, both seeking to exploit the other's perceived weaknesses, and the Bengali Nawabs were no exception.[49] The strength of the Nawabs' army and the stability of their state at Murshidabad allowed them great strength in these negotiations, and Murshid Quli Khan, according to Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam, wanted nothing less than "to reduce them [the *zamindari*] to total servility and subservience".[50] Though *zamindari* remained an influential element in the province's economy and administration, the Nawabs were remarkably successful in bringing them under their central control, effectively eliminating in Bengal the local wars and low-level succession conflicts that had provided the Madras Presidency its first opportunities to gain experience in battle against country powers.

This central stability was also problematic for the Company's militarization in that it effectively disposed of any local need for mercenary support. In the second chapter, I argued that the Madras Presidency's development of an effective military was predicated largely on the Nawab Muhammad Ali's demand in 1749 that the Company ally with him in his desperate fight for the Karnatik throne. Alivardi Khan had his own wars to fight in the 1740s and 1750s, but his own military remained sufficiently powerful that there was no need to turn to the Company for such support. Though at one point the Nawab did request that Fort William loan him an artillery expert, he never looked to Calcutta as a

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[49] P Marshall, *Bengal--the British bridgehead : eastern India, 1740-1828* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 59.
[50] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 49-50.

potential source of mercenaries.[51] On the contrary, he was desperate to ensure that the

Bengal Presidency remained a stunted and insignificant source of military power,

frightened that the Europeans might rise against his state. Where Muhammad Ali cared

little for Company commerce, and was more interested in its nascent army, Alivardi saw

the corporation as a potentially lucrative group of traders, but deeply feared that they

might seek a more active military role in the province. In this context, any attempt by Fort

William to militarize would have been decidedly foolish, one that almost inevitably would

have resulted in loss of support, and perhaps even active hostility, from Murshidabad.

The Bengal Presidency as Bengali

The stability of the Bengal state, combined with the desire of its rulers to maintain

a monopoly on regional military power, effectively hamstrung any plans in Fort William

or Leadenhall Street to develop in Bengal the sort of politico-military role the Madras

Presidency had carved for itself in the Karnatik. The massive profits accruing to the

servants at Calcutta through more traditional trading tactics in spite of this restriction

created little enthusiasm in the fort for schemes disrupting that status quo. So non-

militarized was the administration that the very word "sepoy", at the heart of the Madras

military revolution, is entirely absent from the records of the Bengal Presidency before

1756, and the local recruits gathered up to face Sirajuddaula's attack were only peons and

bakhsaris, undisciplined swordsmen who deserted on the first day of the siege.[52] This

weakness has led Philip Mason to describe the Fort William Council in 1756 as "[t]raders

indeed and nothing more".[53] While this phrase does draw attention to the divergence

between Calcutta and Madras, it fundamentally mischaracterizes the way Company

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[51] Khan, "Introduction: The Twilight of Mughal Bengal," 360.
[52] Letter from Holwell to Richard Bourchier. 17 July 1756. *FWIHC*, 1019.
[53] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 75.

servants in Bengal interacted with local institutions and considered their own role therein. If the strength of the Nawabs prevented the presidency's transformation into a military force, it simultaneously created an opportunity for the presidency to emerge as a political actor as a *civil* administrator providing Murshidabad a local extension of its authority.

We have seen that Murshid Quli Khan and his successors strove to limit the influence landed *zamindari* had on politics in Bengal, hoping to cast the old *zamindari* out of the upper echelons of regional government and to replace them with a new bureaucratic administration drawing authority more directly from the *darbar* at Murshidabad. [54] Unsurprisingly, many of these newly appointed officials and noblemen emerged from the world of commerce.[55] From the first decades of the eighteenth century, for instance, the patriarch of the Jagat Seths, Bengal's great banking family, served as one of the Nawab's closest advisors, and the Seths enjoyed a total monopoly over the mint at Murshidabad.[56] The Bengal Presidency, for all that its charter was formed in London, was deeply enmeshed within that rising merchant class, and it was in that role that the Nawabs allowed them a space to develop as a political power in the Bengali state. To some extent, this politicization was a continuation of the Company's traditional practices: the council increased the number of representatives, both European and South Asian, sent to the Nawab's *darbar*, and, as always, it negotiated constantly with Bengali officials to gain tax concessions and commercial treaties. At the same time, though, the presidency also cultivated a new role *within* that governmental structure, one that made the Company a participant in local politics, rather than just a lobbyist attempting to exploit it.

Nowhere is this involvement more evident than in the Bengal Presidency's role in

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[54] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 50.
[55] Ibid., 53.
[56] Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700-1740," 805; Little, "The House of Jagat Seth," 119.

the state government as the *zamindar* of Calcutta and the surrounding villages. Although

the presidency made little use of this title in the early eighteenth century, the position

semantically placed its servants firmly and incontrovertibly within the province's

government.[57] Most basically, the post made the Company responsible for local land taxes

and tax collecting duties that went well beyond the presidency's obligations as a

commercial taxpayer. Nor did the Company shy from adopting the tactics of their fellow

zamindari, fighting to keep every rupee out of their payments to Murshidabad so

effectively that it often remitted a mere thirtieth of its total collection to the center.[58]

These negotiations created a new relationship between the Fort William Council and the

Nawab, one that broke from the mold of trader-and-government and that pitted them

against each other instead as local administrator and sovereign lord. The Nawab, like

Mughal officials before him, often had to resort to forceful coercion to induce *zamindaris*

to make their contributions to the central *darbar*.[59] The Company, by accepting of the title

zamindar, implicitly acknowledged its own insertion within those complex negotiations.

Several times in the eighteenth century, the Nawab moved against Calcutta to

demand payments in this manner, using blockades and cordons to compel increased tax

payments. Some servants in Fort William smoldered under these challenges: famously,

Robert Orme, serving a brief stint in Bengal in 1752 away from his home presidency in

Madras, complained exasperatedly to Clive that "'twould be a good deed to swing the old

dog".[60] However, his irritated bluster found little purchase in the Council itself, which

readily treated with the Nawab to come to an accord about the taxes owed. This

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[57] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 18.
[58] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 45.
[59] Marshall, *Bengal--the British bridgehead* , 59.
[60] Letter from Orme to Clive. 25 Aug 1752. Quoted in Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 36.

Realpolitik diplomacy led in 1726 to a payment of 20,000 Rs (out of a requested 44,000

Rs), in 1736 to a full payment of 55,000 Rs, and in 1754 to 85,000 Rs (out of 3,000,000

Rs).[61] In these engagements, the Fort William Council based its behavior on the

traditional pattern of negotiation pursued by other Bengali *zamindars*, thus forming a level

of interaction between the Company and the Nawab that closely mirrored the constant

dances for political power that had taken place between Mughal officials and established

zamindari long before the Company had been chartered.

   A *zamindar*, though, was not simply a tax collector: he was also a supposed source

of local governance. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, the Company made few

attempts to realize that obligation. According to one servant, William Tooke, this would

change in 1750, when the Fort William Council decided to elect J. H. Z. Holwell to serve

as the "perpetual *zamindar*" of Calcutta.[62] Holwell seems to have been little interested in

the political ramifications of his role, but, at least in Tooke's rather ungenerous account of

his tenure, he was an avaricious profit-monger whose constant desire to devise new

methods of collecting revenue had the unwitting effect of making the Bengal Presidency a

figure of political, as well as fiscal, authority in the region of Calcutta. In particular, he

sought to derive profit from his position as Calcutta's civil judicial head. Presiding over

this court, Holwell dragged proceedings out for months on end, allowing the fees and

costs associated with the suits to snowball as high as the claimants could bear.[63] Tooke

writes also, aghast, of another of these "shameful method[s]…of adding revenues": that

of "admitting licensed prostitutes…paying a monthly tribute".[64] Though Tooke's

accusations may overstate Holwell's greed, the account nevertheless shows us how

[61] Ibid., 10.
[62] William Tooke's account of the siege. 04 Oct to 11 Oct 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 266.
[63] William Tooke's account of the siege. 04 Oct to 11 Oct. 1756. Ibid., 267
[64] Ibid., 268.

intricately connected the Bengal Presidency as a *zamindar* was to the Bengal

governmental infrastructure in the 1750s.

Holwell, by expanding his *zamindar* duties to provide (and to profit from) at least

a semblance of local law and order, made himself, and by extension all of the Fort

William Council, an integral part of the Bengal state. Significantly, Holwell based his

legitimacy as a provider of these judicial "services" not as a member of the Fort William

Council, but instead as an actor in the wider political hierarchy centered on Murshidabad.

In short, his role was always that of a *zamindar* and never that of a British official. Just as

this rendered him an authority for Bengali subjects, it simultaneously and importantly

provided the Nawab with a local extension of his central power. This arrangement is

reminiscent of the "co-sharing [of] sovereignty" Farhat Hasan suggests characterized

political relationships in the Mughal era.[65] The Bengal Presidency in Calcutta, by the mid-

eighteenth century, had grown out of its origins as a limited trading center to become an

entity increasingly involved in the governance and politics of the province.

Of course, this assimilation was never complete, and the Bengal Presidency,

especially ideologically, never entirely escaped its European roots. Its servants were often

eager to emphasize the distance between their corporation and the state in which it acted.

For instance, the Fort William Council limited the jurisdiction of Holwell's courts on the

basis that this "Eastern Institution" was too innately exploitative and corrupt to be the sole

judicial authority in a British settlement.[66] In 1755, the Company refused to abide by

those laws when a group of lascars were accused of murdering an English captain.[67]

William Watts counseled Drake against asking permission to try the lascars according to

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[65] Hasan, *State and locality in Mughal India*, 35.
[66] Minutes of the Fort William Council, 05 Nov. 1753. "PP 1753," 653.
[67] Minutes of the Fort William Council. 25 Aug. 1755. Home Department and Bengal Presidency, "PP-1755," 328.

the English system on the grounds that "the Nabob might Demand the Lascars to be deliver'd up to him wch Possibly wou'd be attended with great Inconvenience to us in the future" by establishing a precedent that might limit the Company's judicial freedom.[68] The Fort William Council was loath to give up its claim to "Englishness" on questions that did not seem to offer direct profits, and thus its servants espoused a bifurcated identity that attempted at once to maintain the privileges of their status as foreigners while reaping the benefits of their position within the domestic state. Nevertheless, by mid-century, despite the cultivated distance between the Company and local "Eastern Institutions", Fort William found that its profit-hunger was often more effectively sated by conforming to Bengali society than by conforming to overarching British or Company concerns.

This advantageous involvement in the Bengali state led the Fort William Council to involve itself ever more deeply in regional mercantile and political networks to the extent that concerns in those hierarchies often outweighed directives received from London. In particular, the Court of Directors' determination, during and beyond the War of the Austrian Succession, to militarize its holdings in South Asia ran directly counter to the interests and the role the Bengal Presidency had so carefully created for itself. Militarization could only upset the tense balance they had negotiated with Alivardi Khan, who was already convinced that the "hatmen would possess themselves of all the shores of Hindia".[69] When faced with two conflicting demands, one from London requiring militarization and one from Murshidabad prohibiting it, it is unsurprising that Company servants followed the orders of the man who could send an army against them in a matter of days over the orders of employers who might send them a disgruntled complaint in a

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[68] Letter from Watts to the Fort William Council. Entered into the record on 08 Sept. 1755. Ibid., 377.
[69] Quoted in Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 44.

matter of months. Most simply, the Fort William Council chose not to militarize in this period because to do so would have been to commit the presidency to an unwinnable war.

It would be reductivist, though, to leave the explanation of the Bengal Presidency's non-militarization to this simple equation of might and opportunity. As we have seen, the Bengal Presidency did not just protest militarization on the grounds of risk: the Fort William Council actively sought alternatives to those developments, delving deeper into the role of a non-militarized political actor than its predecessors had ever attempted. Indeed, even if the leaders at Fort William had convinced themselves that victory was possible, many factors existed to discourage such an attempt. First, militarization might have invited into Bengal the continuous conflict that defined the Karnatik at mid-century, wars that would have eroded and dismantled the very trade networks from which the presidency derived its phenomenal profits. Second, without an opportunity to serve as mercenaries in support of the Nawab, as the Madras Presidency had done in the Second Carnatic War, the Bengal Presidency could only have militarized *against* the Nawab. Setting out this opposition would have destroyed the Fort William Council's position in the Nawab's government, not only cutting short its influence in the *darbar,* but undermining its local authority within Calcutta. The leadership in Fort William, aware that militarization along the Madras model could only weaken their stability and profitability, instead sought to develop an alternate way of doing business, one that prioritized political and commercial integration with regional power structures and institutions over military arrangements.

By 1756, the drastically divergent paths of the Madras and Bengal presidencies had created two very different administrations with very different sets of priorities, one of which prized military power and one which maintained a more traditional focus on

commerce. Teleologically, working backwards from the Company's later incarnations as an insatiable imperial conqueror, the Bengal Presidency's non-militarization might seem an inconsequential, atavistic development, but, in January 1756, the ultimate triumph of the Madras model was hardly inevitable. The Madras Presidency had yet to prove that any of its wars could turn a profit, while the Bengal Presidency's star seemed ascendant, the value of its imports almost six times that of Madras by 1755.[70] One can speculate that, if these trends had continued *ceteris paribus*, it would have been the Bengal mode of operations, rather than the substantially less profitable and less secure methods of Madras, that would have triumphed over the rest of the Company. One thus should not consider the Madras Presidency as the "new" face of the Company and the Bengal Council as a fading remnant. The victory of the former over the latter was not secure, or even remotely possible, until the collapse of Fort William in 1756.

The Balance Breaks

If Fort William as an institution was so antithetical to militarization, why then did it find itself under siege in 1756? S. C. Hill attributes Sirajuddaula's attack solely to the "mad behavior" of a despot, or more generally as an expression of "the incompatibility of temper between Europeans and Orientals which seems to prevent them from living together in peace on anything like terms of equality".[71] Modern scholarship has done away with these rather useless racist claims in favor of explanations that place the blame more squarely on the actions of the Fort William Council in the weeks before Sirajuddaula took the throne. B. K. Gupta, for instance, suggests that these actions were so disrespectful

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[70] In 1755, the Bengal Presidency would send 411,505 pounds of imports back to London, while Madras managed to scrounge up only 70,257 pounds. Data from Appendix 5: Statistical Tables. "Total imports from Asia" in Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 510

[71] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, lii and lv.

as to represent an abandonment of the Bengal Presidency's earlier position in the Bengal state in favor of a policy of "open defiance" that actively sought to imitate the burgeoning imperialism of the Madras Presidency.[72] If, however, Fort William had chosen to throw in the towel on its politicized commercialism to adopt the expansionism of the south, the change was almost unbelievably abrupt. With little in the council's behavior prior to 1756 suggesting such a paradigm shift, it seems more likely that its actions during the regime change were at least internally justified in a way congruous with its earlier sentiments. I argue that the siege, and the events leading up to it, should be understood not as an aborted attempt at militarization by a would-be imperial power, but rather as a conflict nurtured within Bengal's contemporary political landscape, a battle between a Nawab and one of his *zamindari*.

Though the siege itself took place in late June, the conflict between the Nawab and the Bengal Presidency properly began in April 1756, as Sirajuddaula's grandfather, Alivardi Khan, took to his deathbed. Rumors flew of an impending succession crisis, and, in the midst of the confusion, the Bengal Presidency embarked in a series of actions rightly described as "open defiance". First, the Fort William Council used the crisis as a cloak in which to enact, at long last, some of the improvements that the Court of Directors had demanded on its fortifications. William Watts promised to keep "a watchful eye" on Murshidabad "in case he should appear desirous of bringing us to trouble", proving rather inarguably that the Company knew its actions went against the state's previous stance on its militarization.[73] The council compounded this disobedience with an even more direct break immediately before Alivardi's death, when noblemen had already begun to split off

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[72] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 37.
[73] Watts to Fort William Council. 15 Aug. 1755. *FWIHC*, 887.

into factions for what most imagined would be a bitter succession war. Upon Watts's

recommendation, the Company took sides, granting a merchant, Krishnadas, asylum in

Calcutta from Sirajuddaula's forces, hoping to gain favor with Rajah Ballabh,

Krishnadas's uncle, who seemed well-placed to gain power in the next administration.[74]

The Bengal Presidency further exacerbated these already grave slights after Alivardi's

death by failing to congratulate Sirajuddaula on what proved to be a smooth succession

into power.

For some scholars, these actions in the spring of 1756 are clear indication that Fort

William wanted total license to pursue its own ends in Bengal.[75] Sirajuddaula himself saw

them as unforgivable challenges to his sovereignty, the insults serving as his *casus belli*

against the Company.[76] Yet I argue that the council's aims were neither as imperialistic

nor as grandiose as some historians have assumed. Indeed, by one interpretation, none of

their actions in Bengal, for all that they defied the Nawab, explicitly rejected of the

sovereignty of his state. On the contrary, Drake's entire motivation in offering Krishnadas

refuge in Calcutta was to gain the ear of a man that, in his estimation, would "hold great

posts in the government" of that system, ultimately seeking to use that relationship to

further the Company's power and profit within the confines of state structure.[77] Rather

than jettisoning its earlier reliance on the *darbar* at Murshidabad, the Fort William

Council sought in 1756 to increase its involvement and influence therein by conspiring

with those they expected would soon control it.

Even Calcutta's new fortifications, superficially an apparently inarguable turn

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[74] Drake's account of the siege. 19 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 120.
[75] See, for instance, Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 52.
[76] The council's fortification project and its grant of asylum to Krishnadas were his immediate causes for war. He also cited a longer term complaint, the Company's more long-term tendency to abuse the trade concessions they won at the *darbar*. Ibid., 50-55
[77] Drake's account of the siege. 19 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 120.

towards militarism, can be understood as a continuation of the Bengal Presidency's role as a local civil authority in Bengal. In the same letter in which Watts offered to keep "a watchful eye" on the Nawab, he advised the presidency that "a previous application to the Nabob of leave to fortifye Calcutta [would be] a step highly improper for us to take; for in case the Nabob should absolutely refuse…we must at once give over all thoughts of fortifying or do it in defiance of him".[78] Here we see a nominal, if empty, show of deference to the state: the Fort William Council preferred to act covertly than to risk an open break with Bengali law. The fortifications themselves further suggest that the project had no great imperial aim behind it. While the Court of Directors had envisioned a great restructuring of the fort as dictated by the most modern defense technologies, the servants on the spot were decidedly less ambitious. By June 1756, only two outworks had been completed: a drawbridge at Mr. Perrin's house and an octagon near Mr. Kelsall's garden, neither of which provided much help in the siege.[79] These limited works seem more in line with defenses useful in local uprisings, possibly indicating that the Bengal Presidency saw the regime change as a moment it might exploit, not to set the stage for conquest, but rather to solidify its local power and, secondarily, to placate the repeated demands of London. The servants seem to have hoped that their actions would pass unnoticed in a *darbar* contending with the chaos of succession, which would have permitted them to take up their role as a Bengali *zamindar* after that confusion resolved itself with new allies in court and new stability in Calcutta.

If the Bengal Presidency's policy of "open defiance" was not the first faltering steps towards imperialism, why did the Council takes such a risk? Once again, a possible

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[78] Letter from William Watts to the Fort William Council. 15 Aug. 1755. *FWIHC*, 884-85.
[79] Letter from Fulta to the Court of Directors. 17 Sept. 1756. Ibid., 1032-33.

answer can be found in the nature of the Company's relationship with the Nawab as one of his *zamindari*. Mention has already been made of the near constant suspicion existing between Murshidabad and the more powerful "chief" *zamindari* agitating for increased local sovereignty.[80] Just as the Nawab stretched his own power to control his *zamindari*, so did they use their own strength wherever possible to expand their local power bases and to reduce their obligations to the center. Particularly rebellious were those *zamindari* that S. Nurul Hasan classes as "intermediary", those whose substantial revenue holdings gave them political influence, but who did not enjoy any major territorial independence: these, Hasan writes, were "constantly struggling to enhance their rights and to appropriate to themselves a greater share of revenue".[81] Succession conflicts, the source of so much central instability, were particularly ripe for such revolts.[82] It is possible to interpret the Bengal Presidency in 1756 as one of these intermediary *zamindars* and to read its actions during Alivardi's death as one of these negotiated revolts. I argue that their "open defiance" was not geared towards breaking with and out of the Bengal state, but instead represented a continuation of their participation in that governmental system, an attempt to use expected courtly chaos to expand their freedom therein and to make the jump from intermediary to chief *zamindar*.

But the presidency had bet on the wrong horse. Sirajuddaula, fully aware of the threats to his succession, busied himself throughout Alivardi's death to ensure, by means fair and foul, that his would-be opponents had no chance to organize or to conspire against him. In this task, he proved remarkably successfully, and, as the French Compagnie at Chandernaggar would observe after his installation, "[i]nstead of the revolution with

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[80] Term "chief" zamindari from Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 44
[81] S. Nurul Hasan, "Zamindars under the Mughals," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 294.
[82] Marshall, *Bengal--the British bridgehead* , 59.

which we thought the country was menaced at the death of the old Nawab, everything [sic] appears to be quiet and to submit to his successor".[83] In Fort William, though, Company servants were slow to realize the gravity of their mistake, and Drake neglected to make the sort of apologies necessary after a failed attempt at usurpation, actually exacerbating his dilemma by refraining from sending any presents with his belated congratulations to the Nawab on his coronation.[84] Understandably enraged by this continued disloyalty, Sirajuddaula gathered up his army to march against the Company, hoping at once to bring a recalcitrant *zamindar* to task and to demonstrate for all the solidity of his position as Nawab. Fort William desperately tried to repair the rift, sending Sirajuddaula a gift of horses to being truce negotiations, but the Nawab saw little reason to accept the bribes without any more active commitment towards obedience from the Company.[85] Perhaps too angry to exercise patience or too rash for caution, perhaps simply determined to make a bold statement early in his reign about his sovereignty, Sirajuddaula refused to play by the traditional rules of engagement and opened immediate siege against the Company, eschewing the intervening steps of Alivardi's forceful form of diplomacy.

Still, Drake failed to appreciate how completely his gamble had failed, and he, along with many on his council, expected that Sirajuddaula "would form a blockade…until we came to an accommodation and comply [sic] with his requests", as had been Alivardi's practice.[86] Understanding of the Nawab's true intentions finally dawned upon Drake, at least according to his later account of the siege, when he learned of the defeat of the factory at Kasimbazar.[87] This was far too late to do any good. The men

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[83] Letter from Chandernagore. 26 April 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 1.
[84] Ibid., xlviii.
[85] Letter from Sirajuddaula to Kwaja Wajid. 31 May 1756. Ibid., 4.
[86] Captain Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Ibid., 78.
[87] Drake's account of the siege. 19 July 1756. Ibid., 129.

of Fort William did their best: they worked without sleep to cram in militia training, to throw together gun carriages, and to strategize around shockingly limited war stores, but, without the proper long-term training in logistics and tactics, little could come from this furious bustle.[88] Some hoped that Sirajuddaula's apparent military strength would prove ephemeral in actual battle and that his army would disintegrate in a flood of fair-weather deserters at the first show of resistance, but the Bengal Presidency's troops proved the more inconstant of the two armies.[89] Most of the officers and many of the Company's men deserted the fort after only two days of bombardment. The next day, the remaining Company servants, maintaining an increasingly absurd pantomime of defense after their abandonment by their colleagues and superiors, broke down the gates themselves to bring an end to the awful siege. Sirajuddaula's effort to prove his regime a strong one had met with great success, and his standing in the power game constantly fought between his capital and the *zamindari* rocketed upwards, allowing him to gain, for instance, tax payments of four lakhs and three and a half lakhs respectively from the French and Dutch settlements in the weeks after the siege.[90]

Huddled on the sickly banks of the Hugli river, the survivors of the Bengal Presidency had fallen as quickly as Sirajuddaula had risen, losing all influence in and access to the trade and political networks in which they had only weeks before held such power. As accusations of blame and cowardice ricocheted through the tents, the rump of the Fort William Council could not even agree amongst each other on a coherent enough narrative of the siege to send a letter to Fort St. George. Instead, they sent Charles Manningham to deliver an oral report of the situation and to beg the southerly presidency

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[88] For siege preparations see Captain Grant's account of the siege. 13 July 1756. Ibid., 76-77.
[89] Hill Ibid., lxxviii.
[90] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 82. Note that a lakh is worth 100,000 Rs.

to send "the whole force you can obtain on your Coast, military and marine together…which may enable us to re-establish ourselves in the province".[91] If the Bengal Presidency had been the only administrative center of the English East India Company, this defeat would surely have marked at least a temporary end of its trade in the province. The men dying of malaria near Fulta had none of the resources necessary to effect a reentry into that landscape. But the presidency was not alone, and, for the expansionist objectives of its nearest counterpart, the prospect of a mission into that "Paradise of Provinces" must have seemed a tailor-made opportunity. Immediately upon hearing of the dilemma, the Madras Military Department decided to send a massive contingent into Bengal to recover the Company's lost properties. In October 1756, the mission set forth out of Fort St. George, and Clive, commanding an expeditionary force containing the Madras Presidency's choice troops, arrived in Fulta in December. Granted almost limitless authority to define his objectives, the colonel set his sights high—much higher than the post of a lowly local *zamindar*.

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[91] Letter from Fulta to Fort St. George. 13 July 1756. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, 71, cxxii.

CHAPTER FOUR
War Between the Indias

Introduction

For Indian nationalists and British imperialists alike, few moments in eighteenth-

century South Asia hold such inflated centrality as does the brief battle that took place

between Sirajuddaula and Robert Clive in the mango groves of Palasi on 23 June 1757.

Clive's victory became in the nineteenth century a keystone of Victorian imperial identity.

S. C. Hill captured the overarching mythopoeia in 1905, writing:

> The 23rd of June was the anniversary of the King's accession to the throne, and
> while the ships at Calcutta were firing salutes in the King's honour, Clive and his
> men were fighting a battle, the ultimate result of which was to add to his
> dominions the greatest dependency ever held by a European power.[1]

Plassey was equally significant for the empire's opponents: some participants in the

Indian Rebellion of 1857, arguably one of India's earliest national independence

movements, were convinced that the British Raj was destined to fall exactly a century

after the battle.[2] Though Plassey itself as an engagement was militarily unimpressive,

barely more than a "cannonade", historians of every political bent have long infused

Plassey with importance as a milestone, a harbinger of things to come.[3]

Like many events so submerged in mythology, Clive's invasion has become in

historical memory almost entirely the story of its main characters. For imperial historians,

the campaign was a pure "example of moral courage" and military genius from the

empire's favorite dashing son.[4] Scholars working to revise and dismantle that biased

history have been rather less impressed with Clive's military ability, instead focusing on

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[1] Ibid., cxcix.
[2] Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny : 1857* (London: Viking, 2002), 205.
[3] Heathcote, *The military in British India* , 33.
[4] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, cciii.

the cunning he used to turn members of Sirajuddaula's court against him.[5] The South

Asian actors in the set piece have found their own immortality. Sirajuddaula under the

pens of imperial historians was dismissed as a "horrible, sinful" despot, and his usurper

Mir Jafar, is remembered still in Bengal as a local Benedict Arnold.[6] This focus on

personal drama, though, obscures a more puzzling question about the basic nature of the

battle. Despite a decade of almost constant campaigning in the Karnatik, Clive's most

famous victory unfurled a thousand miles from his home presidency, and the first step

towards the Raj was made in a province far distant from the coast that had kindled those

ambitions. Why did this imperial beginning take place in Bengal, once home to the

Company's least militarized settlements? What advantages did Clive find in this province

that he had not been able to exploit so decisively in the Karnatik?

This chapter will argue that Clive's personal qualities and the immediate political

turmoil within Sirajuddaula's court at Murshidabad were secondary factors in securing the

Company's 1757 victory: more important were the regional differences that had opened

between Bengal and the Deccan in the decades before the battle. Traditional military

histories tend to lump the armies of all Mughal successor states into a single "Indian

Model", as Philip Mason does in his chapter "Elephants and Cavalry".[7] This, though, is as

inaccurate as the monotony of the Dark Century myth. South Asian armies echoed the

political structures they served and underwent an intense period of regionalization in the

first half of the eighteenth century. I will demonstrate that the armies of the Karnatik and

Bengali Nawabs, if they might have been born from the same Mughal traditions,

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[5] Sushil Chaudhury is particularly ungenerous to Clive, depicting him as a relatively poor general often incapacitated by despair with a "lack of understanding of military strategies". Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire*, 110

[6] Quote about Sirajuddaula from Marshall, *An island story*, 435. Information on Mir Jafar from Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire*, 114

[7] See Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 39-55.

developed along astonishingly divergent paths such that, by the end of the Second

Carnatic War, they were hardly comparable as institutions.

Though Kaushik Roy describes the Balanced Military Synthesis primarily as the

ultimate objective of the Company's military reforms, most South Asian states and armies

in the Deccan embarked upon a similar quest to hybridize their inherited martial styles

with the innovations pioneered both by European corporations and other South Asian

armies bringing their own military techniques to the field. Eager to adapt defenses against

and to exploit the advantages of these new tactics, South Asian polities at times even

outstripped the Company in adopting elements, such as sepoy corps, that would later

become integral elements to the Company's Balanced Military Synthesis. These

simultaneous reform movements resulted in an arms race, with armies across the Deccan

borrowing, imitating, and piggybacking off each other's developments and adaptations.

The Madras Presidency, for all its growth as a military power, could not mature quickly

enough to outpace the most successful of these South Asian armies and thus could not

achieve total military dominance in the south. Clive thus failed to establish the British

Empire in the Karnatik not from a lack of ambition, but literally from an inability to

achieve such a conquest against troops keeping pace with his army's own development.

In Bengal, things were different. There, conflict had never reached the fever pitch

present in the Carnatic Wars, and none of the actors in these Bengali wars had been

compelled to import Western military innovations into the province. Accordingly, Bengali

military powers had neither reason nor example to seek a Balanced Military Synthesis of

their own. Clive's invasion of Bengal in December 1756 thus represented a sudden

introduction of a relatively mature version of that synthesis into a sphere essentially

untouched by those reforms. I postulate that, more than any other advantage in the English

Company's arsenal, this ability to move between South Asian regions, from one "periphery" to another, facilitated its first imperial projects. The Company's fractured administrative structure gave ambitious servants the opportunity to levy the innovations they had developed in one of those regions against another, more isolated polity, which had no experience countering or adopting such measures in its own wars. Thus, in a very real sense, the Battle of Plassey, rather than a victory of a European power over a South Asian one, can be more properly considered as a victory of a Karnatik military system over the Bengali state.

The Military Revolution and the Deccan

For many military historians, the Carnatic Wars represented a largely one-sided exchange, with the Company as the sole beneficiary of reform. Kaushik Roy, establishing his theory of the Balanced Military Synthesis, analyzes its emergence only in the confines of the Company's army. Though some South Asian forces underwent "Partial Europeanization", he argues that their efforts were ultimately insufficient to counter the Madras Presidency's far more effective hybrid army.[8] Geoffrey Parker makes a similar analysis, arguing that South Asian armies initially rejected much of the European military revolution because its innovations, particularly "field artillery and musketry volleys", "simply did not fit easily into local traditions of warfare".[9] Like Roy, Parker suggests that South Asian military leaders eventually overcame this cultural inertia in the face of the Company's growing dominance, but their epiphany came too late. The Company's "greater experience", and its greater budget, proved an indomitable obstacle to the

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[8] Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia," 660.
[9] Parker, *The military revolution* , 130.

modernization of their militaries.[10] This model locates the most effective South Asian responses to the Company's army in the late eighteenth century, essentially assuming that country powers working with and against the rapidly reforming Company army ignored its strategies throughout the early Carnatic Wars. I argue the opposite case: the injection of European military innovations into the Carnatic Wars created a kaleidoscope of military development in both European *and* South Asian armies, commanders everywhere seeking to adapt and to adopt new techniques and to rethink the way campaigns could be fought in this rapidly changing context.

One particularly prevalent innovation often passes without comment. To some degree, the use of European troops, whether from Madras or Pondicherry, by country rulers was itself an adaption seeking to access the military efficacy that Dupleix's troops had demonstrated at Adyar. In narratives depicting these wars as primarily European conflicts fought vicariously through Karnatik politics, the South Asian agency in these alliances vanishes, but local rulers at every level were often the initiators of these relationships, actively exploiting the competition between the French and English companies. The two claimants for the Nawabship of the Karnatik, Chanda Sahib and Muhammad Ali, were the most prominent users of this tactic. Muhammad Ali's letters to Floyer demanding mercenary support in 1749 represent a clear break from the Nawabs' traditional military operations. Rather than raising an army amongst the contingents of his *mansabdari*, his pseudo-feudal nobility, Muhammad Ali went outside of that structure after his father's death to seek support from a power that had recently demonstrated its nascent abilities on the battlefield. This, as well as Muhammad Ali's later expansion of his *mansab* ranks to include members of the Company, suggests a willingness to change and

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[10] Ibid., 136.

to adapt traditional military custom as mandated by changing circumstance.

If Muhammad Ali was the most powerful ruler to use the Company as a mercenary force, he was not the only one. Local *palaiyakarars* were generally unable to marshal up enough cash or territory to motivate the Madras Presidency to send a battalion outright in support of their causes, but they nevertheless carved out substantial agency negotiating with European corporations and other political powers during the Carnatic Wars. These local lords were infamous for threatening to open up their territory to the French Compagnie if the Company tried to force them to pay taxes.[11] Although the Company's archives are more reticent regarding their own collusions with local lords, it seems probable that *palaiyakarars* in Chanda Sahib's territory made similar threats against the French corporation. Just as the Kallars of Thanjavur had used indirect attacks to harry much larger Company supply trains, these local lords found oblique access to the developments of the Balanced Military Synthesis by keeping in constant and complex negotiation with those hybridized armies. In this way, small and outspent kingdoms were able to maintain negotiating power against larger polities even as their own troops became increasingly unmatched against soldiers trained with the resources of much wealthier, centralized militaries. Such diplomatic stratagems illustrate that local dynamism the Company met as it undertook its first steps towards military development.

For many in the Karnatik, though, it was not enough simply to march *with* European troops. Rulers wanted to learn that military style for themselves, and throughout the Carnatic Wars one can find examples of this active reform. After observing the tactics demonstrated at Adyar and subsequent engagements, interested country powers proved

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[11] See, for instance, Letter from Cooke to Mil Dept. Rec'd 04 June 1753. Madras (India : Presidency), *DCB-MD-1753*, 94, wherein Cooke blames the loss of Chellubrum on the Phousdar's tax-motivated alliance with the French.

quick and ready to adapt with these advances. Rarely was the extent of these reforms fully captured in English archives, which are surprisingly sparse even in discussing the specifics of the Madras Presidency's own military developments. In the case of country reforms, this institutional reticence was exacerbated by the country powers themselves, which recognized that exaggerating their own vulnerabilities could convince the Company to send them more troops and monetary support.[12] Nevertheless, even without explicit discussion of country military reform in the historical records, evidence of such adaptations proliferates.

Few innovations were so central to the Company's later imperial success than was the sepoy revolution, but the men of Fort St. George were hardly alone in adopting of this new technique of recruitment and discipline. Indeed, some country powers actually beat them to the proverbial punch. Already by 1740, spies working for the Madras Presidency noted that some Maratha armies, raiding the Karnatik after a lengthy war in the west against the Portuguese, had incorporated European firing techniques into their fearsome cavalry.[13] Perhaps spurred on by the French Compagnie's 1746 campaigns, the Marathas had developed their own fully drilled sepoys as early as 1748, the same year that the Company's first shoddily trained South Asian battalions stumbled towards the disastrous siege attempt at Pondicherry.[14] The Marathas were quickly joined in the next decade by

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[12] In 1751, for instance, Muhammad Ali attempted to depict himself as totally helpless, writing to the Company "that the Preservation of these two Countries entirely depends upon you". See Letter from Muhammad Ali to Saunders. Received 16 Feb 1751. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1751*, 12. Similarly, in 1753, the Phousdar at Tanjavur wrote that all his seven thousand sepoys would desert him immediately if he did not get an influx of cash to buy their loyalty. See Letter from Phousdar to Mil Dept. Received 05 March 1753. *Country correspondence, Military Dept., 1753*, 24-5.

[13] Letter from Ravenootla Audiapah to Fort St. George Council. 18 May 1740. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1740* (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1908), 14.

[14] Letter from Murtaz Ali Khan to Moore. No date. 1748. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1748* (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent Govt. Press, 1908), 44.

almost every state in the Karnatik.[15] Even the tiny, local *palaiyarars* sought sepoys of their own, the Killedar (or fort commander) of Vellore fielding several hundred of them against the Company in 1753.[16]

It is true that, without more detailed information on the way these sepoys trained and fought, it is difficult to compare these South Asian troops with those fielded by the European corporations. Nevertheless, it does not seem that the Company sepoys were appreciably better than those of country powers at mid-century. In 1752, the Dalavai of Mysore, seeking to undermine Muhammad Ali's position in Tiruccirappalli, hid his own sepoys in the Company's battalions with the mission to convince its sepoys to defect to Mysore.[17] Company officers, to be fair rather unobservant when it came to sepoys, failed to discern the plants as they drilled with Lawrence's prized recruits. Later, when the plot to inspire desertion was uncovered, Mysore prepared instead to attack Tiruccirappalli directly with 3,000 horse and 600 sepoys.[18] Rather than dismissing this relatively small force as insignificant, the Madras Presidency was galvanized into action, overturning its previous determination to keep out of the Nawab's diplomacy and sending the cowardly Thomas Cooke to open negotiations directly with the Dalavai. This suggests that the Company considered these country sepoy corps palpable threats to their security. If the sepoy revolution changed the face of war in the Karnatik, it in no way granted European corporations dominance in that context.

But sepoys could not simply be *acquired*. The defining characteristic of these troops was the training that allowed them to march and to fight in consistent formation.

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[15] Heathcote, *The military in British India* , 38.

[16] Letter from Muhammad Ali to Mil Dept. 17 Feb 1753. *Country correspondence, Military Dept., 1753*, 18.

[17] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 27 Nov. 1752. *DCB-MD-1752*, 75.

[18] Madras (India : Presidency), "Extract of Fort St. George (Madras) Extraordinary Occurrences." (Madras, December 29, 1752), 100., IOR/H/329, British Library.

Country powers had to develop an officer class able to create, to maintain, and to utilize these battalions effectively. With the possible exception of the early Maratha sepoys, most such corps originated within the companies themselves, country powers winning access to the divisions in a variety of methods. Some rulers built up their first sepoy armies by recruiting deserters from the corporations, as the *palaiyakarar* of Vellore was accused of doing in 1756.[19] Others were more direct. Vishwarao of the Marathas, for instance, demanded as part of an accord with Chanda Sahib that the French general Bussy send him his two most capable Indian officers to create a battalion of "disciplined infantry trained on the western model", called the Gardis.[20] Mysore, initially acting in support of Muhammad Ali, similarly requested a "strong part of Europeans" after meeting the Compagnie on the field to teach them how to counter those tactics.[21] Yet, if Europeans often provided the seeds of these sepoy corps, these battalions regularly grew strong enough to challenge those corporations on the field. Already by 1753, Mysore troops had racked up victories against the Company's army in open battle, suggesting that the "devastating" effect P. J. Marshall claims the military revolution had on country powers proved in the Deccan extremely short-lived.[22]

As sepoy divisions spread throughout the Deccan, country powers sought to equip them with new and better weapons. The Company's imported firelocks, cannon, and gunpowder proved immensely popular commodities throughout the province.[23] Though the Madras Presidency often sent artillery crews along with these cannon, this support

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[19] Letter from Kilpatrick to Mil Dept. 03 March 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 111.
[20] M. G. Abhyankar. "The Marathas" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 351.
[21] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 210.
[22] See the skimish described in Letter from Tanjavur to Mil Dept. Received 25 Feb. 1753. *Country correspondence, Military Dept., 1753*, 20 Marhsall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 499
[23] For instance, the king of Pegu asked the Company for 100 French and 300 English firelocks in 1749. Letter from Pegu to Floyer. 07 March 1749. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1749*, 9

often amounted only to a handful of men. Muhammad Ali, for instance, in his first request for formal support from the Company, asked for a set of cannon manned by only four gunners.[24] Such a small contingent alone could not have hoped to operate the guns on the battlefield: it follows, then, that these men were not simply pointing the cannon where they were told to, but may have been engaged in training country troops to assist in the use of those weapons. This training, wittingly or not, definitively ended the European monopoly on superior artillery capability, and the English Company soon grew wary of country gunners. Clive, for instance, refused in 1752 to share the spoils of a captured arsenal with his Maratha allies out of fear that they might turn its weapons against the Company.[25] A decade later, the presidency refused a favorable commercial treaty with Mysore because it contained a demand for seven thousand of muskets to the kingdom: rejecting the offer, the Council disingenuously claimed that it was against "its long-term policy of never selling arms to Indian powers".[26] This caution contrasts sharply the Company's earlier willingness to include guns as a matter of course in local treaties and speaks loudly to the rapid emergence of South Asian polities as formidable artillery opponents.

As the Madras Presidency tightened its control over English guns, country powers found the Europeans suddenly unwilling to meet their demand for this new style of weaponry. Consequently, the wealthiest and most ambitious rulers created their own munitions factories. Contrary to conventions extolling the quality of European artillery, these proved extremely effective: by the 1760s, guns made in Mysore were held by some contemporaries to be equal to those of the English and had a longer effective range of fire

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[24] Letter from Muhammad Ali to Floyer. 04 Aug. 1749. Ibid., 28.
[25] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 25 Sept. 1752. *DCB-MD-1752*, 49.
[26] Pradeep Barua, *The state at war in South Asia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 77.

on the battlefield than did European guns.[27] The proliferation of such weapons, whatever

the source, changed the battlefield entirely. Dupleix at Adyar had faced an enemy

panicked by volley-fire and incapable of making any accurate answer to his bombardment.

By the 1750s, though, letters from field officers back to Fort St. George spoke of country

troops who met their men with "regular attacks" and "brisk" fire.[28] Thus, at the same time

that the men of Madras were struggling to outfit their rapidly expanding army with usable

guns and to transport those cannon through the subcontinent, South Asian powers in the

Deccan were engaged with precisely the same problems. Though the Company's ability to

import such guns from Britain gave the corporation an advantage throughout the 1750s,

the Company was never able to secure complete dominance in the early Carnatic Wars

with those shipments.

The rapid reforms inspired by the Carnatic Wars, though, were not limited to

materiel and manpower. Perhaps even more significant was the wider shift seen in

military thought and strategy. Philip Mason argues that South Asian warfare in the

eighteenth century was tied up with "an element of ritual" that was too "stylized" to allow

for any rapid reform or even formal thinking about the strategies of war.[29] This dubious

statement would seem invalidated by the willingness of so many country armies to

incorporate sepoys as central elements in their own forces, but it might be argued was just

an exercise in imitation of supposedly more innovative Europeans. Conversely, military

leaders in the Carnatic Wars were deeply engaged in developing new methods of warfare

and strategy that took into account the new styles proliferating through the province and

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[27] M. A. Nayeem. "Mysore" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 371
[28] For an instance of the former, see Letter to the Court of Directors. 06 Aug 1751. "East India Series 1," 13. For an example of the latter, see Letter from Captain Chase to Mil Dept. Received 07 May 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 71.
[29] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 57.

the changing political fabric in which that conflict took place. The decision of the

Thanjavur Kallars, for instance, to attack the English Company's supply lines gave their

leaders a space in which they could maintain political and military significance despite

their limited resources. The Marathas themselves sought similar agency on a larger scale,

their political authority drawing much of its legitimacy from a complex balance between

mercenary support of various Deccan polities and more antagonistic raids, both of which

were to facilitate their collection of a tax, the *chauth*, from those selfsame states.[30]

As country powers began to synthesize their militaries with the innovations

pioneered by the European companies, their strategizing shifted as well to include these

new developments. Muhammad Ali himself demonstrated the power of this new thinking

in 1751 as he sought to break the siege Chanda Sahib and the French Compagnie had

levied against Tiruccirappalli. Any nineteenth-century British schoolchild could have

recited on command how the Company ended this threat. Rather than challenging the

besiegers head-on, Clive marched out of Fort St. David to assault Arcot, Chanda Sahib's

capital in the northern Karnatik. This unexpected attack was intended to distract the

besiegers and to force them to divert the bulk of their forces northward to protect their

home front.[31] Clive's men succeeded beyond all expectations when the garrison at Arcot

deserted as they approached, and Chanda Sahib sent many of his forces away from

Tiruccirappalli. Clive's continued victories against even those reinforcements would

become a compelling first chapter in his imperial hagiography, and many historians

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[30] Nizam ul-Mulk, early in his reign, wanted to deny the Marathas their *chauth*, but found himself unable to even consider such a difficult expedition as their support for the emperor had won their raids approval from Delhi. M. A. Nayeem. "The Asaf Jahs of Hyderabad" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 34

[31] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 35.

consider the Arcot campaign the turning point in the war.[32]

What Victorians failed to realize, and few scholars even today appreciate, is that the campaign was not Clive's idea: it was the brainchild of Muhammad Ali himself. Historians praising Clive from Orme to Macaulay assumed as a matter of course that he had provided the inspiration for the attack.[33] A glance through the archives shatters that convention. In July 1751, Muhammad Ali wrote to Thomas Saunders that "[i]f a Disturbance could be rais'd in the Arcot Country…it would in all likelihood confound the Enemy and break their Hearts".[34] In justifying the attack to the Court of Directors, Saunders even acknowledged its source, writing that "[w]e purpose agreeable to the Nabob's desire making a diversion in the Arcot Country".[35] If twentieth-century scholars such as Henry Dodwell (1920) noted Clive's absence in the planning process, most discussions about the campaign have revolved around the Englishman's involvement.[36] Turning from that speculation back to Muhammad Ali's *attested* contribution, though, we can find in this watershed campaign compelling evidence that the Nawab, like many country rulers, understood, appreciated, and thought deeply about the military innovations occurring around him. The relatively languid pace of "traditional" warfare in South Asia would have made rapid mobilization like that of Clive's infantry unthinkable, and, had Muhammad Ali been trapped by that line of thinking, he would likely have settled down in Tiruccirappalli to weather a costly and indecisive siege, hoping that epidemic or

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[32] Lawford, *Britain's army in India* , 116 and Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 36

[33] See, for instance, Macaulay, *Essay on Lord Clive*, 35-36; Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 187

[34] Letter from Muhammad Ali to Thomas Saunders. Received 29 July 1751. *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1751*, 48.

[35] Letter from Madras Council to Court of Directors. 06 Aug. 1751. "East India Series 1," 14.

[36] Henry Dodwell, *Dupleix and Clive the beginning of empire,* (London: Methuen & co. ltd., 1920), 56. Perhaps the worst example of a continued focus on Clive in the campaign can be found in N. C. Chaudhuri's biography of the conqueror, which devotes a full section of the appendix to imagining scenarios in which Clive played an active role in coming up with the strategy and bringing it to fruition. See Nirad Chaudhuri, *Clive of India : a political and psychological essay* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), 417ff

monsoon might drive his attackers from the field before his supplies ran out. Instead, he considered his resources and the strengths they gave him, especially in the realm of mobility, and used those new tools to levy an attack against an unexpected vulnerability.

The actions of various country powers throughout the Carnatic Wars demonstrate inarguably that the Madras Presidency was not the only institution to seek a Balanced Military Synthesis. While country rulers may have undergone only "Partial Europeanization", this should not be considered a failing, but rather an integral requirement of war in South Asia, which itself necessitated hybridization from all sides. From troop recruitment to battlefield tactics, polities across the Deccan strove to adopt new techniques that either borrowed from or answered innovations prevailing within the forces of the European corporations and among other country powers, while in turn those Western entities borrowed heavily from those armies they met in battle. The Carnatic Wars, then, cannot be considered simply the setting for reforms of charismatic men like Stringer Lawrence, but must be reevaluated as a point in which all of the Deccan threw itself into an arms race of militarization and development.

The Winners of the Revolution

The Carnatic Wars ushered into the Deccan a period of rapid and dynamic reform for armies and states across the region. The speed and diversity of change in this period, from the Marathas' creation of the Gardis to the Kallars' decision to switch to supply raids, is reminiscent of Stephen Jay Gould and Niel Eldredge's evolutionary theory of "punctuated equilibrium", in which constant, gradual change is met periodically by sudden bursts of speciation.[37] Hendrik Spruyt uses this theory to illuminate the rise of the

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[37] The theory was first set out in N. Eldredge & S. J. Gould. 1972. Punctuated equilibria: an alternative to phyletic gradualism. Thomas J. M. Schopf, ed. *Models in paleobiology*. San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper.

modern state in medieval Europe. In his framework, Spruyt argues that "exogenous

shocks" such as "defeats in war, revolution, or emergent capitalism" inspire communities

to undertake "a flurry of institutional innovations", some of which will ultimately prove

more useful than others in facilitating societal survival in the wake of that shock.[38] A

similar, if much accelerated, process seems to have characterized the Deccan during the

Carnatic Wars, with the Battle of Adyar and subsequent demonstrations of the European

military revolution serving as widespread "exogenous shocks" creating a space for various

polities and armies to attempt substantial innovation and adaptation. Ultimately, though,

just as some species mutations proved more viable than others in encouraging species

survival, so did some articulations of the Balanced Military Synthesis prove more

effective than others in allowing their respective militaries and states to marshal their

resources in continued wars.

Within a century, of course, this field of competition would give way to clear

dominance by the English Company's military, but that rise was not the result of innate

ability, capable commanders, or especially ingenious strategic innovations within the

Company's forces. As we shall see, a far more important consideration was simply the

Company's budget. Already during the early Carnatic Wars, the bullion that the Madras

Presidency received and stole from fleets out of London, as well as the surplus resources it

monopolized from its counterpart presidencies, allowed the Madras Military Department

to outspend all but the largest and most efficient states in the Deccan. Though local

palaiyakarars could harass this increasingly costly army, the Company's budget allowed

expansion on a level these smaller kingdoms could neither meet nor stop. At midcentury,

though, this advantage had not given the presidency complete control of the Karnatik:

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[38] Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors* , 25.

several powers managed to keep pace with, or even to surpass, the Company in its military development. The most successful and enduring of these would be the armies of the Maratha Confederacy and of the Mysore kingdom.

The first of these, the Maratha Confederacy, was not a unified polity in the mid-eighteenth century: it had fragmented into several distinct states in the course of internal wars in the early part of the century, but it remained despite this break-up one of the strongest South Asian institutions in the post-Mughal period.[39] The Maratha state, initially propelled onto the subcontinent's political landscape by Shivaji Maharaj in the seventeenth century, from its inception was highly militaristic, and its army, particularly its cavalry, presented Aurangzeb with his most intractable opponent in his Deccan campaign.[40] In the first half of the eighteenth century, much of that military power was concentrated inward in a bitter war between two sources of political power: the admiralty and the cavalry.[41] Even as this war raged, though, Maratha commanders remained capable of long-range raids, traveling at times fifty miles a day to launch offensives against distant territories that "struck terror in the hearts of the defenders leaving them no choice but to surrender".[42] As these cavalries reached European settlements on the Coromandel Coast, though, Maratha officers discovered to their chagrin that these traditional tactics could do little damage "against artillery and walled posts defended by trained musketeers of European powers".[43]

These experiences prompted immediate military reform in the Maratha states.

[39] B. Shaik Ali. "Mysore under Haider Ali" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 83.
[40] M G. Abhyankar. "The Marathas" in Ibid., 348-49.
[41] Ultimately, in the 1750s, the latter would win out against the former, in 1756 burning the Marathas' once intimidating fleet to ash with the help of British troops. See a description of this mission in Anil Athale, *Struggle for empire : Anglo-Maratha wars 1679-1818* (New Delhi: Reliance, 2001), 80-83
[42] M. G. Abhyankar. "The Marathas" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 350 and Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia," 659
[43] Ibid., 659.

Unlike many polities confined to the Deccan, many Maratha commanders had a head start on these adaptations, having already met European opponents in bloody battles with the Portuguese along South Asia's Malabar Coast in the 1730s. By the 1740s, tactics and strategies observed in that conflict were beginning to percolate into the Maratha armies fighting on the eastern shores, and one of the Madras Presidency's spies as early as 1740 reported seeing "4,000 Musketteers in the Moratta Army who fir'd after the European Manner".[44] The coming Carnatic Wars greatly accelerated these existing developments. As we have seen, the Marathas fielded their first sepoys in 1748, the same year the Company's first drilled South Asian recruits took up arms, and, by the early 1750s, Chanda Sahib's Maratha ally, Vishwarao, was institutionalizing those drilled forces in a new branch of the infantry: the Gardis.

These developments quickly proved their worth. In 1751, the Maratha general Bajirao used his sepoys to force the French Compagnie general, Bussy, into an unconditional surrender, and in 1753 Company servants would note with surprise that the Marathas were steadier and more skillful fighters than the French Compagnie.[45] The Marathas would continue to improve their version of the Balanced Military Synthesis well into the second half of the century, and P. J. Marshall writes that their troops by the 1760s could "maintain a more rapid and concentrated fire" than that produced by the Company's own artillery crews.[46] Clearly, the Maratha Confederacy was neither ignorant nor indifferent to the military innovations sweeping through the European corporate armies in this period. In fact, they were among the first to adopt strategic changes in response to

[44] Letter from Ravenootla Audiapah (?) to Fort St. George. 18 May 1740. Madras (India : Presidency)., *Country correspondence, Public Department, 1740*, 14.
[45] A. R. Kulkarni. "The Marathas" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 138 Leter from Lawrence to Mil. Dept. 01 April 1753. *DCB-MD-1753*, 53
[46] Marshall, *Trade and conquest* , 28.

these developments, sometimes outpacing even the Company in their reforms. The resulting force, far from a state "devastated" by the Company's army, was one that could counter those tactics with astonishing success.

Of course, the Marathas were not exclusively a Deccan power, and the Balanced Military Synthesis they used so effectively in the mid-eighteenth century was not solely the product of their experiences in the Carnatic Wars. A more direct demonstration of those conflicts' affects on country military powers came from southerly Mysore. Autonomous since 1610, the Mysore kingdom had arisen as "the only strong and organized kingdom that held its own in the south" after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire at the end of the seventeenth century.[47] Unlike the sprawling Maratha Confederacy, this polity was relatively compact and had little experience fighting against Europeans before the outbreak of the Carnatic Wars. Further contrasting the Marathas' development, a fundamentally fragmented process spread out through the diverse militaries of its confederacy, Mysore's transformation into a modern military state was almost entirely predicated on the efforts of a single individual: Haider Ali, who in 1761 triumphed in a lengthy war to seize total control of the kingdom. Once established, he turned his attentions back to the Deccan, and his unending wars with Madras Presidency rendered him a British bogeyman, "the terror of Leadenhall street".[48] Though these wars belong to a period after this investigation, they were nevertheless intimately connected to developments in the early Carnatic Wars, in which Haider Ali had acquired the motivation and education that fueled his lifelong ambitions.

Haider Ali had started his military career as an inglorious peon in the Mysore army

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[47] T. R. de Souza. "Mysore under the Dalavai Regime (Wodeyar)" in Kulkarni and Nayeem, *History of the Modern Deccan*, 80.
[48] Quoted in B. Shaik Ali. "Mysore under Haider Ali". Ibid., 83.

at Tiruccirappalli.[49] It was in the shadow of that imposing fortress that he first came into

contact with the military reforms rapidly spreading through the Deccan, and Haider was

immediately inspired to use these developments to further his own plans. With the war

spoils he won on that campaign, he hired five hundred men in 1750 and learned to train

them as sepoys.[50] These men formed a core of an army that expanded rapidly with his

empire, and, by the end of his life, his army of two hundred thousand men would revolve

around a division of fifteen thousand drilled sepoys.[51] Throughout the 1750s, this military

was occupied by power struggles in Mysore, but it would emerge from this fray more than

able to challenge the Company on the field. In 1767, Colonel Joseph Smith found that his

own infantry could not match Haider's precise maneuvers, and his army was almost

defeated by Mysorean cannon, bombarding the Company for hours from the impunity of a

swamp the Europeans could not ford.[52] When Smith finally fended off the attack, he was

ecstatic to learn that his men had "seized about Nine of their Guns and are now in

possession of about Fifty Pieces of their Cannon".[53] A generation before, Dupleix had

been so contemptuous of Mafuz Khan's guns in 1746 as to toss them down a well: now,

Haider's cannon, made locally in Mysore, were first-rate by any standard.[54] After only

two decades of work, his foundries could cast such guns that French noblemen, surveying

a few sent to Paris in the late 1780s, found them "equal to any produced in Europe".[55]

      As important as this drilled infantry was, Haider's greatest military advantage lay

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[49] De Souza. "Mysore under the Dalavai Regime" in Ibid., 82.
[50] B. Shaik Ali. "Mysore under Haider Ali" in Ibid., 83.
[51] M. A. Nayeem. "Mysore" in Ibid., 371.
[52] "East India Series 7," Correspondence on Indian affairs to the Secretary of State's Office., 1732, 47, IOR/H/99, British Library.
[53] Ibid., 49.
[54] See Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, I, 76
[55] Irfan Habib and Indian History Congress., *Confronting colonialism : resistance and modernization under Haidar Ali & Tipu Sultan commemorating Srirangapatnam 1799*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), xxii and xxix.

in his cavalry. The Madras Presidency had few tools to counter these attacks, the Court of

Directors demanding that the Company hire country horse as mercenaries rather than

investing in a costly cavalry of its own.[56] Haider was thus able to field a far more flexible

and far more loyal contingent of cavalrymen than was Fort St. George, giving him a level

of mobility that his enemy could not match. Haider exploited this advantage adroitly

throughout his wars with the Company, using his speed to conduct raids and to retreat

from open battle whenever the balance of force tipped against him. Enraged by these

tactics, Eyre Coote, commander of the Madras Presidency's military, wrote a letter

insulting Haider and daring him to commit to a decisive encounter. Haider sent back an

eloquent and biting response demonstrating his awareness of the balance of power

between himself and his enemies:

> Give me the same sort of troops that you command and your wishes shall be granted…No. I shall march your troops until their feet shall meet their bodies. You shall not have a blade of grass, nor a drop of water. I will hear of *you* every time your drum beats, but you shall not know where I am once a month. I *will* give you battle, but it must be when I please, and not when you choose.[57]

This astuteness earned Haider's title in the Company as "the most formidable Enemy that

ever attack'd us".[58] The British never defeated him, and Mysore's expansion would only

be halted at the end of the century when the Company led a massive alliance of country

powers against his successor, Tipu Sultan.[59] Haider's lasting success, though

chronologically part of the late eighteenth century, relied fundamentally on his

experiences as a young man fighting in the early Carnatic Wars, where he had first been

exposed to nascent versions of the Balanced Military Synthesis and had first acquired the

resources and desire to create his own such hybrid.

[56] Bryant, "British logistics and the conduct of the Carnatic Wars (1746-1783).," 280.
[57] Quoted in Bryant, "Asymmetric Warfare," 457.
[58] First quote from Letter from Smith to Mil Dept. 03 Oct. 1767. "East India Series 7," 65.
[59] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 68.

The victories of the Mysore and Maratha states in the late eighteenth century clearly were connected with their experiences in the early Carnatic Wars, indicating that the Madras Presidency was not the only institution to benefit from those wars. Instead, the conflicts facilitated massive development across the Deccan, ushering in a period of rapid speciation in the punctuated equilibrium of southern India's military history. Though the most spectacular results of the process, both in the Company's military and in its country counterparts, awaited later decades, reforms occurred on all sides throughout the wars as polities struggled to find a Balanced Military Synthesis uniquely suited for their respective resource bases. Whether one looks at the *palaiyakarars* who stole sepoys from nearby armies, Muhammad Ali who won wars with his strategies, or the Marathas whose artillery prowess forced the Company to reconsider how it approached country powers, one can find clear evidence that the Company was not the only power to embark on military reform in this period. The solutions each army found in this new milieu differed widely. Haider's Balanced Military Synthesis, for instance, unlike Lawrence's, made heavy use of cavalry, and he maintained traditional elements of Mysorean warfare absent from European armies, such as his extremely effective corps of rocketeers.[60] These deviations, though, did not make Haider's model inherently inferior. In order to gain decisive dominance over these various successful adaptations, the Company would need more than military skill alone.

1756: A Year of Opportunity

By 1756, the Madras Presidency's vast military structure bore almost no resemblance to the paltry garrisons it had fielded a decade before, but these improvements

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[60] Habib and Indian History Congress., *Confronting colonialism* , xxii.

had not conferred upon the Company complete regional military dominance. Similar reforms among various country powers had kept the playing field relatively level, and, though the Second Carnatic War proper had ended in 1753, the presidency remained deeply embroiled in local conflicts. Hemorrhaging money and losing hope that the promised war spoils would ever materialize, Fort St. George was desperate for some advantage in the field. In the spring of 1756, that miracle seemed to arrive. Nizam Salabat Jung of Hyderabad approached them to ask for their support in expelling the French from the Deccan entirely.[61] Company and Crown officers alike accepted the offer excitedly, but, before they could act, more news arrived, news telling of Sirajuddaula's attack on Fort William. The Madras Presidency relinquished their alliance with the Nizam to attend to this disaster, a choice that appeared to many a pure "Calamity".[62] Ironically, though, in this latter crisis the Madras Presidency would find the opportunity to achieve the expansion and profit that it had sought so fruitlessly in the Karnatik.

At the time, though, the Council at Fort St. George must have felt that the Bengal Presidency's call for help had come at the worst possible moment. On 12 July 1756, Salabat Jung's emissary, Ibram Ali Khan, met with George Pigot, president of Madras, to tell him that his master, long the stalwart ally of the French, had grown tired of Pondicherry's machinations and wished to rid himself of the Compagnie's soldiers.[63] If the Madras Presidency would help effect this expulsion, the Nizam would grant the Company tax rights to the Circars, a lucrative strip of agricultural villages on the northeastern coast of the Deccan. The Military Department jumped at this unexpected possibility, drawing up a plan to send the royal regiment under Colonel Adlercron along

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[61] See Minutes of the Mil Dept. 30 July 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 246-47
[62] Letter to R. Bourchier from Mil Dept. 25 Aug 1756. Ibid., 265.
[63] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 12 July 1756. Ibid., 222.

with a massive contingent of Company troops to help the Nizam chase the French from

Hyderabad and from Deccan politics forever. Only two days later, though, Pigot

interrupted these preparations in the Military Department with the troubling news that

their counterparts in Calcutta had been attacked—had been defeated.[64]

At first, Fort St. George tried to answer both calls for assistance, with priority

going to Salabat Jung's plot, the Bengal Presidency receiving only a few hundred men as

a quick bandage. As the gravity of the situation in Bengal became clear, though, the

Military Department realized that these reinforcements would be insufficient. Almost

without debate, the council decided "to suspend the Prosecution of the design'd

Expedition to Salabat Jung's Camp" in favor of outfitting Robert Clive with a massive

army to "rescue" Bengal.[65] Adlercron never forgave this change-of-heart, refusing

pointblank to help Clive in his preparations.[66] Yet, despite these obstructions, Clive's

expedition gathered rapidly on the coast, and eight ships with three thousand of Madras's

best soldiers aboard left for the north on October 16. In light of the opportunity they had

forsaken at Hyderabad, the men of Fort St. George had massive expectations for these

men, ordering Clive not just to retake the Bengal Presidency's former properties, but to

extend them. As to the method of this expansion, the Military Department offered only the

ominous advice that "the Sword shou'd go hand in hand with the Pen".[67]

The determination and haste with which the Fort St. George Council put together

this rescue mission, and the readiness with which they abandoned Salabat Jung, have long

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[64] The first rumors that "of dangerous Disturbances rais'd in Bengal by the new Nabob" reached Fort St. George the very next day, on July 13. See Minutes of the Mil Dept. 14 July 1756. Ibid., 226

[65] Minutes of the Mil Dept. 06 Aug. 1756. Ibid., 250.

[66] The disgruntled royal commander's retaliation at being denied his mission spanned from the petty, hesitating to give Clive the right to hold courts martial, to the significant, refusing to allow the Company's to use the royal artillery corps in the expedition. See Letter from Adlercron to Mil Dept. 23 Sept and 06 Oct 1756. Ibid., 283 and 323

[67] Letter from Mil Dept to Drake. 13 Oct. 1756. Ibid., 329.

would remove a major competitor from the field, the Company would still face shrewd country diplomats, tenacious local rulers, and the increasingly powerful militaries of the Mysore and Maratha expansions. Things must have seemed simpler in Bengal. Though Alivardi Khan had fought Marathas early in his reign, these attacks had quieted by 1745, before the Marathas' quest for military reform began in earnest.[72] War in Bengal had thus been largely isolated from the Karnatik military revolution. This seclusion presented the Madras Presidency an enticing opportunity: an invasion of Bengal would allow Madras to extricate its forces from the tangled web of south India and to levy them against an opponent that had not benefited from that decade of military hybridization. The Military Department was eager to reap the advantages of that discrepancy, entreating Clive to "fight with such an Army that has never before appear'd in that Country [and] that has been Victorious in a thousand Battles".[73] In Bengal, the Madras Presidency saw the opportunity to bring its Balanced Military Synthesis to bear against an enemy utterly unfamiliar with its tactics, and the potential rewards of that mission may have seemed to some sufficient reason to relinquish its promise to the Nizam.

A Step into Empire

For the most hopeful in Madras, the first reports of Clive's invasion must have bee disappointing. The invasion got off to a rather inauspicious start. Admiral Charles Watson battled with rough seas for every mile of his journey from Madras to Fulta, and the men aboard, reduced to half rations, were weak with scurvy when they finally landed in Bengal more than two months later.[74] More epidemic awaited them at Fulta, the disease-ridden swamps of the Hugli having decimated both the survivors of the Bengal Presidency and

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[72] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 38-9.
[73] Letter to the Nawab of Purnea from the Mil Dept. 13 Oct 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 332.
[74] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, cxxvi-ii.

the Madras Presidency's first contingent of reinforcements. These misfortunes, though, did nothing to quench Clive's ambitions, and he arrived eager to establish his reputation as a military commander in the northeastern province. Almost immediately, he wrote Sirajuddaula a letter equal parts boast and intimidation: "You may already have heard that there are [persons] arrived in Bengall, such as both in Valour and Exp[erience] never came into the Country before".[75] If Sirajuddaula missed the threat, Clive's letters to various officials and merchants he hoped to convert to his cause spelled out his intentions even more pointedly. To the Seths, he wrote, "I hope you will not think me vain in telling you that We have had as powerfull Enemies as the Nabob to deal with upon the Coast of Cormandel, & been attended with success the like may happen here".[76] His early communications in Bengal overflow with such references to past victories.[77] Clearly, Clive had great hopes that the wars of the south had prepared him for even greater triumphs in Bengal.

After a few weeks of recuperation, Clive mustered his men to test out those grandiose claims and to take back Calcutta for the Company. On 31 December 1756, his men were ambushed near the fort of Baj-Baj, the first active resistance they had encountered. Though the attack was fierce, the Company soldiers, sepoys and Europeans alike veterans of the Karnatik, held their lines with a steadiness that seemed "astonishing" to their opponents and quickly won the initiative back from their ambushers.[78] This relatively minor action was, in some sense, the premiere of the Madras Presidency's Balanced Military Synthesis on Bengali soil, and, like the Compagnie in 1746, the English

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[75] Letter from Clive to Sirajuddaula. 21 Dec. 1756. Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," Country Correspondence (Bengal, 1756), 3, National Archives of India.

[76] Letter from Clive to "Seat Mahtabray and Merajah Sroopchund". 21 Jan 1757. Ibid., 11.

[77] To other instances can be found in Clive's letters to Khwaja Wajid and Sirajuddaula on 21 Jan and 30 Jan 1757. Ibid., 12, 16

[78] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 79.

Company emerged as the victors over troubling initial odds. Unlike Dupleix, though, who had lacked the resources and, perhaps, the desire to press his advantage into conquest, Clive had the ability, the ambition, and a formal mandate from Madras to push on. Word of his showing at Baj-Baj raced ahead of his troops, and resistance melted away from this new style of army. At Tannah Fort, the next military structure on Clive's path to Calcutta, the native troops lost their nerve completely, sneaking surreptitiously away before Clive could open an assault. Hill writes that this rapid retreat led to the rather absurd defeat of the unexpectedly empty fort by "a drunken sailor" who, at eleven at night, "waded through the moat, climbed the ramparts…and cried out that the Fort was captured", his equally inebriated colleagues making quick work of the few Bengalis who remained.[79] Even Calcutta fell to Watson's navy and Clive's troops, the troops within fleeing the fort on 02 January 1757 to regroup with the Nawab's larger army in Murshidabad.

Clive reestablished the Company's garrison in the derelict Fort William, a much healthier alternative to Fulta, and began to conduct raids on nearby trading centers with arrogant impunity. In the meantime, Sirajuddaula scrambled to gather together an army to meet this unexpectedly formidable enemy. As both Company and court prepared for war, Clive made a nominal gesture of reconciliation, proposing a treaty that would have forced the Nawab to make reparations for his initial attack on Calcutta and to give the Company massive trade concessions, the right to open a mint, and permission to fortify the city against any future attack.[80] Sirajuddauala refused, particularly incensed at the idea of paying the Company for the trouble it had caused him in June and utterly unwilling to

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[79] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, cxxxi.
[80] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 95-6.

grant the presidency a mint.[81] Accordingly, Sirajuddaula left Murshidabad early in 1757

with a massive army to march once again against Calcutta. Though both sides continued

lukewarm attempts at diplomacy, the mistrust and hostility prevailing between the two

was too great to overcome with halfhearted negotiation. Skirmishes broke out along the

front lines on February 03, and Clive launched his troops into open battle the next day.

Clive's epistolary bravado indicates that he anticipated as easy a victory against

Sirajuddaula as Dupleix had enjoyed against Mafuz Khan, and little in his march towards

Calcutta contradicted those expectations. From this inflated perspective, the battle for

Calcutta on February 04 was disastrous. Long accustomed to almost bloodless encounters,

Clive's men reeled and faltered as their ranks were decimated by the Nawab's artillery.[82]

Clive should not have been as shocked as he was that Sirajuddaula's army was more

effective than Mafuz Khan's had been. Simply put, Bengal was a much larger, more

stable, and more prosperous state than the Karnatik had been in 1746. More importantly,

Sirajuddaula's military, active both in the recent succession troubles and in the constant

task of guarding Bengal from external invasion by Maratha or Afghan troops, was far

more experienced than the Nawab of the Karnatik's army had been in 1746. Sirajuddaula

had only a few months before proved his military skill in a somewhat belated war of

succession against his cousin, Shaukut Jung.[83] These successes, building on the already

fearsome reputation of Alivardi's troops, solidified the Nawab's army as the dominant

military power in the province, capable of bringing its power to bear against threats of

external raids and internal rebellion alike. That strength stands in marked contrast to

Mafuz Khan's hastily thrown-together army in 1746, outfitted and commanded by the

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[81] Ibid., 96-7.
[82] Ibid., 99.
[83] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, cvi-cviii.

ruler of a small state struggling to legitimate his claim in a deeply unstable province.

Clive discovered this divergence to his dismay on the morning of 04 February 1757, but the Company's army, drawing on a decade of intense reform in the Karnatik and its resulting Balanced Military Synthesis, was ultimately able to overcome these initial difficulties. Relying on the Karnatik strategy of intimidation where traditional tactics failed, Clive pushed onward with the assault in spite of his losses. "[T]he boldness of the design terrified the Nawab", who was used to more hesitant maneuvers on the field of battle, and he fled, giving up his favorable position to make a new camp some six miles from the fort.[84] Without officers and troops espousing the same level of discipline cultivated in the Company's army during the Lawrence reforms, it is unlikely that Sirajuddauala could have rendered his initial advantages into enduring victory in a lengthy confrontation. Recognizing that further battle at this juncture would only increase Clive's advantage, hoping, perhaps, to use a truce to effect his own military reforms, the Nawab agreed on February 11 to the appropriately titled February Treaty, a document essentially repeating the terms he had earlier rejected.[85]

This treaty rocketed the Bengal Presidency to a trading position that in many ways was more promising than the one it had occupied before the seizure of Fort William. As eager as the commercially minded rump of the Fort William Council might have been to exploit those concessions, though, its freedom to act had been effectively hamstrung by their southern colleagues. The Madras Presidency, never particularly altruistic, had been unwilling to cede the plurality of its military power to an administration historically antagonistic its own objectives. Despite the furious objections of Manningham, the Bengal

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[84] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 99-100.
[85] See Letter from Sirajuddaula to Clive. 11 Feb 1757. "Military Sundry Book," 31-33.

representative in Madras, Fort St. George had given Clive full authority, over and beyond

that of the Bengal Council, to "act in Behalf of the Company both in a Civil and a Military

Capacity".[86] Madras justified this usurpation of the Bengal Presidency's power with the

explanation that Clive needed complete freedom to return to the south the moment a

European war threatened the uneasy peace Fort St. George had forged with Pondicherry.[87]

Once in command, though, Clive proved less pliant than his superiors wished, making full

use of his new position as the only servant ever to exercise a complete monopoly over a

presidency's operations.[88] His ambitions were not difficult to guess. In 1746, Clive had

hastily abandoned his first post as a writer to serve as a volunteer in its nascent army: with

thousands of troops at his command, he was hardly likely to return to simple trading.

It is less clear, though, how Clive initially envisioned his role in the Bengali

political landscape. In 1752, Robert Orme wrote an oft-cited complaint to Clive against

Alivardi's latest tax demands, grumbling that "twould be a good deed to swing the old

dog. I don't speak at random when I say the Company must think seriously of it".[89] Many

historians draw a heavy line between Orme's regicidal ramblings and Clive's actions in

1757, but I argue that Clive's overthrow of Sirajuddaula was not inevitable from the

moment he set foot in the province. Instead, he seems to have been, at least initially, less

interested in formal conquest than in the possibility of exporting to Bengal the military

model that prevailed in the Karnatik, specifically seeking by force or by negotiation to

carve out a role for himself as a source of military support in return for tax farms from the

Bengal state. Several times in the winter and spring of 1757, Clive offered to help

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[86] Manningham's protest can be seen in the debate in the Mil Dept on 30 Sept 1756. Quote in Letter from Mil Dept to Adlercron. 23 Sept. 1756. Both in *DCB-MD-1756*, 283, 309-10.
[87] Letter from Mil Dept to Clive. 13 Oct. 1756. Ibid., 333.
[88] Peers, "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India," 150.
[89] Letter from Orme to Clive, 25 Aug. 1752. Quoted in B. K. Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company, 1756-1757, background to the foundation of British power in India*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966: 36.

Sirajuddaula put down local uprisings or guard against external threats, proposing variously to send an artillery corps to serve in the Bengali army, to protect the borders against the Marathas, and even to march with the Nawab against dissidents in the western state of Patna.[90] In return, Clive wanted blanket permission to make war on the French Compagnie at Chandernaggar.

Sirajuddaula, though, was horrified that the Company might seek such power in his sovereign territory and was determined to force the corporation back into commerce. When Clive refused, Sirajuddaula raged that "you have only…a peace in appearance with me, but your real intention [is to] make war against with me in the Rains," a deceit much unbecoming of "a soldier or a man of Bravery".[91] Though Sirajuddaula did accept Clive's artillery crew as a demonstration against these suspicions, the offer of mercenary support seemed to tread too closely on the Nawab's military monopoly. Though he never openly rejected these Clive's proposals for joint action, Sirajuddaula made sure to smother emerging threats before Clive could mobilize his promised troops.[92] He further forbade any attacks on the Compagnie, demanding, as his grandfather had, that any outbreak of European hostilities be limited to "fighting ships" and that peace be maintained between the corporations in Bengal.[93] Clive ignored this prohibition entirely, attacking and defeating Chandernaggar that March with Watson's help. Furious, the Compagnie and Murshidabad began to collude against the Company, and whatever hopes Clive might have entertained about working *for* the Nawab unraveled. Accordingly, he and his fellow warmongers became more open about their desire for complete license in the province.

[90] Letters from Clive to Sirajuddaula on 16 Feb, 15 March, and 14 May 1757. All in Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 48-9, 105.
[91] Letter from Sirajuddaula to Clive. 19 Feb. 1757. Ibid., 37.
[92] See, for instance, Sirajuddaula's letter to Clive on 15 March 1757, in which he tells Clive to take his men back to Calcutta as the uprising in Patna had been quelled without his help. Ibid., 49
[93] Quoted in letter from Mohan Lal to Khwaja Wajid. Trans. 13 June 1757. Ibid., 118.

Watson encapsulated this arrogance well in a letter to Sirajuddaula threatening that, if the Nawab did not comply with the Company's interpretation of the February Treaty, "I will kindle such a flame in your country, as all the water in the Ganges shall not be able to extinguish".[94]

Watson's threat was not idle: as he wrote the letter, Company servants across the province were busy stoking up revolt against the Nawab. Even in the Madras Military Department's first discussions of the situation in Bengal, such a manufactured rebellion had been considered, but Clive and his underlings did not begin to push for such a revolt in earnest until that spring.[95] Their plot appealed to both Hindu merchants, most prominently the Jagat Seths, and to elements in the Muslim military leadership, including Mir Jafar whom the Company selected as their prospective replacement for the Nawab. While imperial historiography tends to see the conspiracy as an indigenous revolt of Hindus against their Muslim oppressors, more recent revisions have suggested that the Company fueled this dissatisfaction far beyond what domestic politics warranted.[96] Whatever the source of individual discontent, it is difficult to argue that the conspiracy could have emerged without the Company's constant pressure. Men like the Jagat Seths would not have thrown their lot in with Mir Jafar without Clive's military support making success a likely possibility. There can be no doubt that, whatever their allies' motivations, the Company was the prime author and conspirator in this revolt.

That central role suited the new sense of identity that seems to have coalesced among Clive and his supporters in these months. The pretense of pure commercialism vanished from their rhetoric. In the spring, Company servants in the spring had argued

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[94] Letter from Watson to the Nawab. 04 March 1757. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, II, 273.
[95] For Madras discussions, see Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 89.
[96] For traditional account, see Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, xxiii; for modern revision, see Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 87.

that its military should act primarily to buttress and to expand more traditional and more highly valued commercial activities, a pretense Clive himself made use of in March, claiming that "our arms have always been employed [for] Justice, and for the support of our Trade".[97] But this nominal deference to commerce deteriorated as the political conspiracy accelerated, giving way to a vision of more complete political and military control in Bengal. Accordingly, the treaty the Company signed with Mir Jafar was a much more oppressive document than that signed with Sirajuddaula. Though the February Treaty had focused largely on trade rights, with military concerns appearing only in a provision allowing fortifications in Calcutta, the new treaty essentially made the Company the sole military arm of the state, the corporation appropriating even the authority to decide when and where those forces should be used.[98] Sushil Chaudhury rightly describes this as "an infringement of sovereignty, reducing the Nawab to a cipher".[99]

Company servants would have preferred to couch their ambitions behind Mir Jafar's regime, as they had done in the Karnatik with Muhammad Ali, refusing the title of "principal" belligerent to avoid any diplomatic entanglements in future conflicts. Certainly, Clive hoped Mir Jafar would serve as the "principal" against Sirajuddaula, but, as tensions reached their breaking point, the would-be usurper stalled and vacillated. Frustrated, Clive wrote impatiently to his co-conspirator, chastising him that "I am determined to risque every Thing on your Account, though you will not exert yourself".[100] But Mir Jafar continued to hesitate all the way to the battlefield. Clive, who desperately

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[97] Letter from Clive to Jagat Seth. 31 March 1757. Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 64.
[98] Treaty described and signed in Minutes of Bengal Presidency. 19 May 1757 in Bengal Presidency, "Secret and Military Consultations" (Bengal, December 22, 1756), 108., IOR/P/A/1, British Library
[99] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 170.
[100] Letter from Clive to Mir Jafar. 22 June 1757. Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 126.

wanted to finish the campaign before monsoons broke at the end of June, pressed for battle alone. His army thus marched on the offensive, for the first time acting as the primary aggressor in the war, pursuing territorial and political ends without a single representative of a country power to dilute its actions. Though Plassey did not immediately create a formal and recognized British Empire in India, the engagement signified, more explicitly than any military operation yet in the Company's history, the actions of an imperial power.

Victory in Bengal

The openness of Clive's campaign against Sirajuddaula and the consequences of his victory therein together ensured that Plassey has held a central place in imperial history as the beginning of the beginning of the British Raj, the first step towards its later empire. This, though, was not the only historical phenomenon at work in Palasi mango groves on 23 June 1757: here a conflict between two distinct regional spheres was also unfolding, a clash of two different Indias. An observer watching the armies from above might have assumed, at first glance, that a Bengali victory was assured. Arriving early, Clive had the stronger position, his troops formed up around the Nawab's hunting lodge on a small rise amidst the trees. Yet, if he held the better ground, he was absurdly outnumbered: against his three thousand men, Sirajuddaula had mustered together some 35,000 infantrymen, 15,000 horse, and a separate cavalry of elephants.[101] Clive lost his nerve and, dropping his grandiose dreams of conquest, hoped only to buy enough time that he and his soldiers might slip away in the night to the safety of Calcutta.[102] According to Sushil Chaudhury, this sudden flash of fear was ill-placed: despite Clive's apparent

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[101] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 121.
[102] James Lawford, *Clive, Proconsul of India : a biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 253.

disadvantages, the odds tilted overwhelmingly in his favor.[103] Though Chaudhury

emphasizes Sirajuddaula's internal difficulties, the point only becomes more valid when

one views the battle as a clash between regions. Plassey was a stunning demonstration of

the results the Company could gain by levying the innovations and experience acquired in

the Karnatik Wars against opponents insulated from those reforms.

Just after dawn, the Nawab's men fired the first shell of the battle, the stone

crashing through the orchards around the Company to claim the arm of an unfortunate

grenadier.[104] Sirajuddaula, though, was facing an uphill battle in more ways than one.

Foremost among these difficulties was a political, rather than a military, crisis. Plassey

was only the climax of a wider conspiracy seeking to depose the Nawab. Mir Jafar, though

unwilling to stand explicitly against Sirajuddaula, refused equally to fight for him, and, as

the battle opened, he marched his massive contingent of fifteen thousand infantrymen to

the sidelines, to watch the day's events like spectators at a football match.[105]

Apocryphally, later that day as the battle began to turn against the Nawab, Sirajuddaula

called Mir Jafar into his camp, tossed his own turban in the dust, and begged his general to

fight for it as a symbol of the Bengali state, but Mir Jafar remained unmoved and pursued

his passive treason until the end.[106] Alone Mir Jafar's disloyalty should not have lost the

Nawab the battle, but its effects were compounded by the fact that Sirajuddaula had been

forced to bring his less-trusted officers with him to Plassey. His best and his closest

generals were stationed elsewhere, guarding his borders against external invasion, and

thus to meet Clive he could only call upon the second-rate and the suspect.[107] Though

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[103] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 158.
[104] Lawford, *Clive, Proconsul of India* , 254.
[105] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire* , 151.
[106] The story of the turban is given in Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 83.
[107] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 122.

Clive had fewer men, their loyalty was less questionable: Sirajuddaula had to wait until the day of the battle to learn if any of his troops were still willing to fight for him.

These political difficulties exacerbated Sirajuddaula's already substantial military disadvantages, and Clive was able to exploit the vulnerabilities of Bengal's relatively unreformed armies into a much greater and complete victory than he might have won against more experienced armies in the south. The Nawab was greatly hampered by his relatively weak artillery, the military branch that had inspired some of the Karnatik's most determined reforms. Though Sirajuddaula had fifty-three cannon on the field, more than Haider had in the entirety of his first war with the Company, these guns were far less capable than those in the south, and, the case of the unfortunate grenadier aside, his bombardment of Clive's troops resulted in few hits.[108] Indeed, according to Orme, Clive's men were able to avoid the brunt of the cannonade simply by sitting down and presenting too low a target for the Nawab's guns.[109] In the mid-afternoon, the Company's artillery managed to turn this early imbalance into total dominance when a sudden downpour soaked the Nawab's powder into uselessness, his gunners unused to campaigning so close to the monsoon.[110] The English Company had overcome this precise problem in 1753, and Clive's army marched nowhere without a watertight tarpaulin to keep its powder dry. His artillery thus continued its fierce shelling as Sirajuddaula's guns fell silent, providing an important turning point in what had begun as an indecisive engagement.

After this rain shower, Sirajuddaula's hopes rested almost entirely in his trained cavalry. This force proved skilful, nearly encircling the Company from the rear, but, without concentrated artillery support, it could not press the attack home. The rest of the

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[108] According to Pradeep Barua, Haider fielded a total of 49 guns in 1767. Barua, *The state at war in South Asia*, 78.

[109] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 175.

[110] Edwardes, *The Battle of Plassey and the conquest of Bengal.*, 145.

Nawab's men, the loyal remnants of his infantry, had no hope of mounting any precise attack of their own. Though Jean Law, commander of the Compagnie's forces in Bengal, had repeatedly offered mercenary assistance, Sirajuddaula refused to agree to any military alliance with a European power.[111] This rejection, while preserving Sirajuddaula's sovereignty, limited his army to an undisciplined infantry, with neither the experience nor the tactical knowledge needed to answer the consistent, steady volleys of the Company's three thin lines.[112]

At first, the Nawab's men stood steady, but the Company's continued assault opened cracks in their resolve. James Kilpatrick's division sallied out from the Company's grove against Clive's orders, winning significant ground against the Nawab's frontlines.[113] Late in the afternoon, one of the Company's cannonballs killed Mir Mardan, Sirajuddaula's best general on the field. His death proved the breaking point: seeing him tumble from his elephant, the Nawab's infantry panicked completely. Their remaining officers could do nothing to return order, and the Sirajuddaula's army dissolved. Their chaotic retreat became "a general rout", Clive's soldiers pursuing the fleeing Bengalis into the dying light.[114] Sirajuddaula himself escaped Clive's men, but, within a week, he was captured by Mir Jafar's forces and murdered by his successor's son in an unofficial execution.[115] His fate, at some level the result of an internal political conspiracy, was in the end sealed by the innate disadvantages his military model faced when challenging a military developed in the reforms of the Karnatik Wars.

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[111] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire*, 151.
[112] Lawford, *Clive, Proconsul of India*, 253-4.
[113] Ibid., 258.
[114] Chaudhury, *The prelude to empire*, 160.
[115] Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, ccvii.

An Empire between Peripheries

Plassey was a watershed, for contemporaries as well as scholars looking back in hindsight. Letters expounding the victory's significance poured into Clive's camp, Admiral Pocock praising the colonel on a victory "of extraordinary importance not only to the Company, but to the British nation in general".[116] Clive, though, at least rhetorically attempted to distance himself from the regicidal usurpation he had brought into being. Immediately after the battle, Clive wrote to Mir Jafar to "congratulate you on the Victory, which is yours not mine" and to request permission to officiate his coronation.[117] Few in attendance, though, could have missed the significance of the ceremony at Murshidabad: Clive was the all-powerful kingmaker, offering the throne to the Company's carefully selected claimant, and Mir Jafar lacked the power needed to challenge the army that had enthroned him. The Company's ability to oversee this political puppetry was not a product of Clive's genius or even of British designs, but rather the result of his experiences with the Madras Presidency in the preceding decade. The Carnatic Wars had both impelled and encouraged growth in the presidency's military and militaristic objectives. In 1757, Clive found the perfect opportunity to act on those increasingly grand ambitions within a province essentially divorced from the furious arms race. It was the Karnatik, not London, that had conquered Bengal.

Plassey was not just a single victory. By breaking the Nawab's army before it could undertake the sort of reform seen in the Karnatik, Clive had done much to secure the Company's military dominance in the province, thus opening the door, perhaps more than any other event, for the creation and expansion of the Company's eventual empire. While,

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[116] Admiral Pocock quoted in Ibid., cciii.
[117] Letter from Clive to Mir Jafar. 24 June 1757.Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 130.

importantly, Plassey itself did not result in the Company adopting a fully imperial role in Bengal, the battle placed the corporation firmly on the path towards that identity. If formal empire awaited the Battle of Buxar in 1764, when the Bengal Presidency usurped the role of ruler entirely from the Nawabs who they perceived as too defiant, Clive's earlier triumph in 1757 had secured for the Company many of the benefits of an imperial power. Perhaps the most important of these advantages were the riches the Company seized in the wake of the battle, materializing in the north the war spoils for which Madras had long searched in the Karnatik. Immediately upon securing the throne, Mir Jafar paid Clive and the Company over thirty million rupees, about three million pounds, a sum he would double with further "gifts" to the corporation in the coming decade.[118] The new Nawab also granted the presidency so many tax farms that the Company was able to purchase its yearly trade entirely with monies seized in the province, thus ending once for all its dependence on bullion from Britain.[119] This not only demonstrated for the still skeptical Directors that the Madras Presidency's militarized outlook could, in the right context, turn immense profits, but also provided a massive revenue base with which continued expansion of that model could be funded.

Many Company servants in South Asia, surveying the results of Clive's campaign, renewed their interest in a fully militarized corporation, and the Company's military capabilities skyrocketed. In 1757, Clive had sailed to Bengal essentially with the entirety of the Madras Presidency's army: just over three thousand men. After Plassey, those numbers exploded with even more rapidity than that seen in the early Carnatic Wars. By 1783, the Company had under its control some ten thousand European soldiers and a

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[118] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 127.
[119] Ibid.

hundred thousand trained sepoys.[120] This expansion received much support from the

revenue stolen out of Bengal, funds which allowed the Company to mount major

expeditions across the subcontinent—and even into China.[121] The growing military

powers in the Deccan, such as Mysore and the Marathas, could not hope to keep up with

this expansion, hampered as they were not only by smaller territories, but also by the

financial demands of their states' infrastructures. Powers that had kept pace with or

exceeded the Madras Presidency throughout its initial phase of militarization now found

themselves outspent. The Company's sudden influx of resources, not the inherent

superiority of their military, allowed them to defeat Mysore and the Marathas by the early

nineteenth century. In some ways, then, the Company's later victories in the south of India

were predicated on the continued benefits of its first victories in the north.

This chapter began with a puzzling question. If the Madras Presidency's military

abilities so outstripped those of its Bengali counterpart, why did empire, or practical

empire, emerge first in the north? Rephrasing this question in terms of Gallagher and

Robinson's theories on Victorian Empire, we might ask: why did the Company's practical

empire emerge in one of its peripheries before the other? The Madras Presidency in 1756

bore all the hallmarks of a peripheral agency tending towards imperial conquest:

ambitious servants, failing methods of traditional economic practices, and a politically

tumultuous local situation.[122] Yet, unlike civil servants working for the Crown in the

nineteenth century, the men of Madras could not call upon the full resources of a global

imperial power. Instead, their military strength had to be developed slowly over time and

within their local surroundings, in this case through their participation in the early

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[120] Bryant, "Indigenous mercenaries in the service of European imperialists," 3.
[121] Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 127.
[122] Webster, *The debate on the rise of the British empire*, 75-76. For a longer discussion of the theory, refer to chapter one of this thesis.

Carnatic Wars. However, rather than accruing gradual dominance over that locality, this development only incited an arms race across the Karnatik and the wider Deccan, in which many states strove to engage in similar and simultaneous military reforms. Whatever Fort St. George's ultimate ambitions, its resources could not be marshaled up swiftly enough to gain power sufficient to effect empire in that local periphery.

Here, though, the regionalization of South Asia would prove involuntarily beneficial for the most militaristic of servants in Madras. Clive and his fellow soldiers were able to extricate their forces from the stalemate that had developed in the Deccan and to insert them into a province that had been isolated from the Carnatic Wars and their attendant developments. Possibly any of the stronger military powers in the Karnatik in 1756, from Mysore to the Marathas to the Compagnie, would have been in the position to challenge Sirajuddaula's army, but only the men of Fort St. George, answering the call to arms sent from Fulta, had the ability and the motivation to sail their army northwards in search of such ambitions. From this, we can see that, unlike mid-Victorian expansion, the first imperial projects of the East India Company were not solely the product of peripheral agents responding to local political and economic changes. Perhaps even more important than these developments was the ability of Company servants to move beyond their respective peripheries to other administrative hubs contending with entirely different regional realities. The victory at Plassey only occurred because ambitious Company servants, inducted and empowered in their militarism by the political fabric of the Karnatik, were able to exploit corporate resources developed for that specific locality to overwhelm the political and military institutions of another region. The empire that ultimately emerged from Plassey, was not simply created on the periphery, but rather born from the interperipheral interactions and mobility of its first proponents.

CONCLUSION

In the imperial narrative, Clive's long, disaster-ridden voyage from Madras to Bengal in late 1756 was the most laudable sort of rescue mission, motivated by "national honour" to save his colleagues at Fulta and to revenge his comrades killed in the so-called Black Hole of Calcutta.[1] So self-evident did these reasons appear in these mythologies that they pass almost without comment, H. E. Marshall writing, for instance, that "[w]hen Clive heard of this horrible deed, he marched against the native Prince [Sirajuddaula], and utterly defeated him in a battle called Plassey".[2] This assumption, though, has little foundation in Clive's own letters. In the volumes of correspondence between Clive and various Bengali officials and merchants before the Battle of Plassey, I have found only one overt reference to the Black Hole, a reticence that contrasts sharply with Clive's continued boasts about his military ability and his great victories in the Karnatik.[3] If the Madras Military Department had initially justified its intervention as an attempt to reverse "the dreadful Effects of this Calamity" that had befallen the Bengal Presidency, there was nothing innately humanitarian about the mission, at least as it was conceived and carried out by Clive.[4] His expedition was an invasion and usurpation of both the Bengal state and the Bengal Presidency, allowing the Madras Presidency access to the full resources of "that Valuable Settlement".[5]

The Madras Presidency was entirely open about its desire to appropriate this administrative power. As we have seen, Clive was assigned total control of affairs in the

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[1] Orme, *A History of the military transactions*, II, 86.
[2] Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, *Our island story* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1906), 436.
[3] The explicit reference can be found in the letter from Clive to Seth Mahatbra and "Merajah Sroopchund" on 12 Jan Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 10.
[4] Letter from Madras Mil. Dept. to Richard Bourchier. 24 Aug 1756. *DCB-MD-1756*, 265.
[5] Minutes of the Madras Mil. Dept. 21 Aug. 1756. Ibid., 255.

province far beyond what his position as military commander would logically have required. Charles Manningham, the Bengal Presidency representative sent to Fort St. George from Fulta, protested fervently against this further diminishment of the Fort William Council's already enfeebled power, arguing that Clive's control "would lessen them so much in the opinion of the Company's Servants, and of all the Natives, that they would be rendered absolutely incapabable [sic] of ever transacting the Company's Affairs in their Different Stations".[6] But the Madras Military Department was unmoved by these arguments, Clive retaining his total authority.[7] Part of Fort St. George's willingness to ignore Manningham stemmed from its assumption that Clive's rule in Bengal would be temporary. He was to return to Madras as soon as war broke out again in the south, and news of the Seven Years' War filtering into South Asia suggested that this conflict lay not far beyond the horizon.[8] Clive, though, had other ideas and reneged on his promise to return. His presence in and control over Fort William ensured that rump of the commercially minded council that had so long found such profit in trade could not reassert its influence over the presidency's operations. In one stroke, Clive thus eliminated the Bengal Presidency's model of politico-commercial business and replaced it unilaterally with a militarized, imperialistic version that went beyond even that prevailing in Madras.

The elimination of the Bengal Presidency's commercial outlook as a compelling alternative to Madras's increasingly ambitious militarism was not strictly the result of Sirajuddaula's attack, but more directly the product Clive's shrewd exploitation of the chaos catalyzed by that defeat. Nevertheless, while his seizure of power from the Fort William Council did much to reverse the presidency's erstwhile non-militarization, it did

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[6] Manningham in Minutes of the Mil Dept. 30 Sept. 1756. Ibid., 310
[7] Minutes of Mil. Dept. 01 Oct 1756. Ibid., 310.
[8] Letter from Madras Mil. Dept. to Clive. 13 Oct 1756. Ibid., 333.

not in and of itself prove the viability of his militarized alternative beyond the Bengal province. The Mysore kingdom and the Maratha Confederacy continued their own military development, far outstripping the capabilities of the Madras Presidency, which Clive had robbed of its military strength. But that very defiance would give the Company the power to expand its burgeoning imperial project over those previously unbeatable foes: Mysore and the Marathas, as functioning states, were unable to match the Company's newfound military expenditure funded by its northern conquests. As Tara Chand writes of Mysore's defeat, "British gold effected what British guns had so far failed to accomplish".[9] Thus, by invading Bengal in 1756, Madras ensured the dominance of its ideology in the Company's administration and, ultimately, allowed the fiercest proponents of that doctrine access to the resources needed to bring their ambitions to fruition.

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the initial militarization of the English East India Company and the early results of that process were fundamentally tied to what its servants experienced on a quotidian basis in their respective stations in South Asia. That shift from politicized commercialism towards militarism was innately shaped by pressures within those geopolitical contexts, the subcontinent's heightened regionalism finding echo in the Company as its own administrations diverged from each other to respond more effectively to their local realities. This project has attempted to illuminate how such a regionalized lens on the Company's activities can bring to light new forces and dynamics at work in the Company's turn towards imperialism. Nevertheless, this analysis in no way provides a complete model of the Company's transformation into a militarized power or the expansion that followed that development. Substantial further study is necessary in order to examine more fully how that phenomenon emerged,

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[9] Quoted on Habib and Indian History Congress., *Confronting colonialism* , xvii.

continued, and came to dominate the South Asian political landscape.

Perhaps the most obvious gap in my current investigation is the conspicuous absence of the Company's third presidency: that centered in Bombay. Though the Madras and Bengal presidencies represented the respective extremes of militarization in this period, the Bombay Presidency played a significant role in the Company's history. In fact, Fort St. George corresponded far more frequently with servants in Bombay than with those to the northeast, and Richard Bourchier, president of Bombay in the 1750s, was far more active in the Carnatic Wars than Roger Drake ever considered being. Douglas Peers offers a possible interpretation of the Bombay Presidency's actions, suggesting that the institution, hemmed in by increasingly hostile Maratha states, chose to focus on maritime trade and naval warfare rather than cultivating a relationship with polities to the interior.[10] This would suggest that servants stationed in Bombay had created a third model of doing business in South Asia, one as fundamentally shaped by its local context as the Madras Presidency's militarization and the Bengal Presidency's *zamindari* activities. Further investigation is needed to determine the specifics of that alternate operational paradigm and the role the Bombay settlements played in the Company's transformation into an imperial power.

As this thesis has attempted to argue, though, that shift was not simply the product of the Company's internal administration. Beyond that institution, another subject in dire need of further study is the French Compagnie des Indes. As this corporation was *not* regionalized on the spot, but unilaterally directed out of Pondicherry, it immediately offers

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[10] Peers, "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India," 55.

up interesting grounds for comparative work.[11] It might be fruitful to contrast the way

servants in this centralized model responded to South Asia's regionalism with the way

servants in the English Company's divided internal structure navigated those same

pressures. Did employees of the French Compagnie seek, as their British counterparts did,

to enmesh themselves into their local realities? If so, how did they accomplish these

integrations while maintaining theoretical deference to Pondicherry in the unique political

setting of the Coromandel Coast?

A more specific area of inquiry about Compagnie takes us back to that coast, to La

Bourdonnais's initial attack on Madras in 1746. While I have argued that the attack was

meant as revenge for British naval raids on Compagnie shipping, this explanation sheds

no light on the strength of that offensive. La Bourdonnais and Dupleix's victories in 1746

are clear proof that the Compagnie's military, both numerically and qualitatively, far

outstripped that Morse scrambled to create among his panicked men. In fact, Governor

Dumas, Dupleix's predecessor, had experimented with trained sepoy troops as early as

1739, long before the War of Austrian Succession became a matter of concern in South

Asia.[12] This suggests that French Compagnie's militarization was spurred on by different

motivations than those inspiring the Madras Presidency's first developments in that area.

Imperial historiography held Dupleix responsible for that transformation, Monstuart

Elphinstone conflating that misassumption with several other imperialist myths in his

explanation that the idea of "interfering in the lawless conflicts that arose out of the

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[11] This, in fact, became problematic for relations between the two corporations in Bengal in 1757. The French Compagnie at Chandernaggar attempted to secure a treaty of neutrality with the Company, but Clive and Watson refused, justifying the rejection by the fact that the Bengal Presidency would be immediately bound to its terms while the men of Chandernaggar would be able to act against the Company freely while they waited for a signed version of the treaty to come back from Pondicherry. See letter from Clive to Sirajuddaula. 07 March 1757. Bengal Presidency and Military Department, "Military Sundry Book," 42.
[12] Fortescue quoted in Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 29.

decadence of the Moghul Empire…first germinate[d] and…develop[ed] in the admirable brain of Dupleix".[13] This much-beleaguered Frenchman, though, had little to do either with the Compagnie's initial militarization, undertaken by Dumas, or its initial declaration of war, made by La Bourdonnais without Dupleix's permission. A more balanced, less Francophobic account might speculate that Dumas's actions, like La Bourdonnais's, emerged out of anxieties brought on by the English Company's superior naval power. Certainly, further study is needed to understand why Pondicherry felt compelled to embark on this costly militarization in the absence of either European or country conflict on their turf.

Finally, this thesis has restricted its analysis almost exclusively to the decade between the Battle of Adyar and the Battle of Plassey, when the military divergence between the Bengal and Madras presidencies gaped most starkly. Clive's arrival in Bengal and his usurpation of power from the Fort William Council drastically shifted the power relations between the two administrations, his expedition essentially transporting the Madras military wholesale into Bengal. The southern settlement thus became the weaker power center, losing Fort St. David to the French Compagnie in 1758 and struggling to hold on to its own headquarters.[14] In contrast, Clive's ambitions ushered the Bengal Presidency into a rapid era of militarization and political expansion directed from its new headquarters, a far more imposing Fort William some miles from the husk of the old fort. This massive shift, though, did not necessarily translate into increased uniformity within the Company. All three presidencies continued to act independently, only infrequently in communication with each other and with London, and, of course, South Asia remained as

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[13] Elphinstone, *The history of India*, 75.
[14] Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 86.

diverse as it had been before Plassey. Douglas Peers has outlined some of the ways the presidencies' continuously divergent experiences shaped their military responses, but more such directly comparative studies are needed to explore the full significance of this division in the later eighteenth century.[15]

The importance of the regionalism inherent to each presidency's outlook and historical experience is rarely fully captured in current historiography, and many works continue to treat the Company's servants as essentially uniform actors, drawing upon a similar pool of resources and a unified set of priorities and desires.[16] This thesis has sought to demonstrate the Company in the mid-eighteenth century had no such coherent identity, but rather espoused a variety of roles and self-conceptions created and defined by the South Asian contexts in which its servants lived their quotidian lives. This opens a new space for South Asian agency to express itself in the Company's history, illuminating the power of country governments to affect Company ideologies and focusing one's analytical lens more explicitly on local levels of relationships, where one can find incredible diversity and dynamism in the way South Asian actors came into contact with Company servants.

This consideration is particularly relevant with reference to eighteenth-century South Asian armies, which for generations have been written off as essentially stagnant in the face of European military developments. Even recent works betray elements of that characterization, Geoffrey Parker arguing that South Asian armies met many of their

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[15] Peers, "Aspects of the military history of the British in eighteenth century India."

[16] K. N. Chaudhuri, for instance, seems to assume that all Company servants wanted empire and that Madras militarized first only because servants there were able to take advantage of local political disruptions. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, 129. Other historians such as P. J. Marshall at times recognize the divergences between these institutions, but even Marshall describes the early militarization of the Company as if it occurred evenly throughout the subcontinent. Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," 498-99

initial defeats because they rejected military innovations that "simply did not fit easily into local traditions of warfare".[17] Yet, when one breaks away from the dated convention of a uniform "India" to focus on specific regions, one can see that local rulers did engage in determined military reform whenever they came into contact with new military styles, their innovations running the gamut from minor tactical changes like the Kallars' new focus on supply raids to Muhammad Ali's learned strategizing to Haider Ali's massive and expansive modern military machine. This thesis has sought to do away with the convention of depicting Asian armies as unchanging institutions writing their own doom with stubbornness. Instead, I have posited an alternate explanation for the Company's first victories, one that emphasizes the significance of South Asia's political regionalization and demonstrates the way that militaristic Company servants exploited that context. In such a model, the Company's fractured internal structure and the ability of its servants to move through those divergent spheres were far more immediate factors in the first steps towards empire than were any fictitious claims of innate European superiority or ingenuity against their South Asian opponents.

Had Clive and his fellow would-be imperialists been unable to move their burgeoning army between two regions containing such discrepant levels of militarization, a victory in the Deccan on the scale Clive managed in Bengal seems vanishingly unlikely. This observation provides a refreshing palliative against the many pseudo-hagiographies that depict Clive as "Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, Napoleon", capable of "labours of a Herculean kind".[18] Nevertheless, I do not seek to argue that British India would have been entirely impossible without this interperipheral imperialism. It is, of course, conceivable

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[17] Parker, *The military revolution* , 130.
[18] Robert Harvey, *Clive : the life and death of a British emperor*, 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), 388.

that, in the absence of the events of 1756 and 1757, the Bengal Presidency's mix of commerce and politics would have risen to dominate the Company's yearly revenue so completely as to render its much less profitable southern counterpart insignificant. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest the patience with which the Court of Directors had treated Madras's wars was not infinite: the men of Leadenhall Street briefly considered pulling out of south India entirely in 1761 in frustration at its continued lack of revenue.[19] The militarization of Madras might have simply proved a failed experiment in the Company's history, ultimately unable to compete with the more successful models of integration and operation that had developed in other settlements.

Of course, this is far from the only possible alternative to Clive's conquest of Plassey. It is equally imaginable, if not more so, that the Madras Presidency's continued impoverishment, especially as the Seven Years' War ushered in a new period of conflict between the French and English corporations in 1756, would have obliged the men of Fort St. George to seek increased support from the metropole. A sudden influx of military or financial reinforcements sent out of London by the Crown or the Court of Directors could have had the same effects in the Karnatik as did the massive injection of Bengal bullion after Plassey, pushing the Company's army quantitatively and fiscally beyond its opponents. In turn, this would have set a precedent for later imperial projects in that the state and metropole would have been far more active the early creation of that territory. Though clearly such counterfactuals cannot be verified, these speculations suggest that the continued agency of Company servants on the periphery in the late eighteenth century, noted by scholars such as C. A. Bayly and Douglas Peers, may have been the direct result of the interperipheral nature of these early campaigns. The posited model of

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[19] Bryant, "British logistics and the conduct of the Carnatic Wars (1746-1783).," 289.

interperipheral imperialism thus may illuminate some of the methods that servants acting on the ground used to carve out autonomy even when their objectives ran counter to the interests and orders emanating out of the much wealthier metropole.

Alivardi Khan famously mistrusted the Europeans in his province, convinced that "the hatmen" intended to "possess themselves of all the shores of Hindia".[20] But the Englishmen with whom Alivardi interacted, from whom he demanded taxes and deference, ensconced as they were in the crumbling ramparts and massive warehouses of Kasimbazar and Fort William, had no such intentions. According to B. K. Gupta, Alivardi knew that he had little to fear from their commercial and political objectives: his deep unease stemmed instead from reports he heard of events in the south, where French and English company servants alike had begun to agitate for such conquests.[21] Sirajuddaula has received harsh historical judgment for ignoring these misgivings and taking on a power he could not defeat, but such condemnations fundamentally mischaracterize the English Company as an institution in the eighteenth century. Rather than a unified entity, the corporation existed in South Asia as three independent administrations, each of which had forged its own local relationships and identity in response to its unique regional setting. Sirajuddaula's attack on Fort William was a product and continuation of the pattern of interaction that had developed between the Bengal Presidency and the Bengal state in the previous decade, but the 1756 siege had the inadvertent effect of destroying that relationship entirely. This created a vacuum the Madras Presidency was eager to fill, effectively replacing a commercial institution with a fervently militaristic one. It was that mobility and the tactical advantages it conferred, far more than any military genius or

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[20] Quoted in Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company*, 44.
[21] Ibid., 44

vigor, that allowed the Company's first conquest. Indeed, the "hatmen" who made Alivardi's fears a prophecy were not simply Europeans imposing their strength on a defenseless "Hindia", but are more usefully considered actors in a South Asian context using the tools of and exploiting the divergences between many different and disparate "Indias".

APPENDIX

POLITICAL MAPS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH ASIA
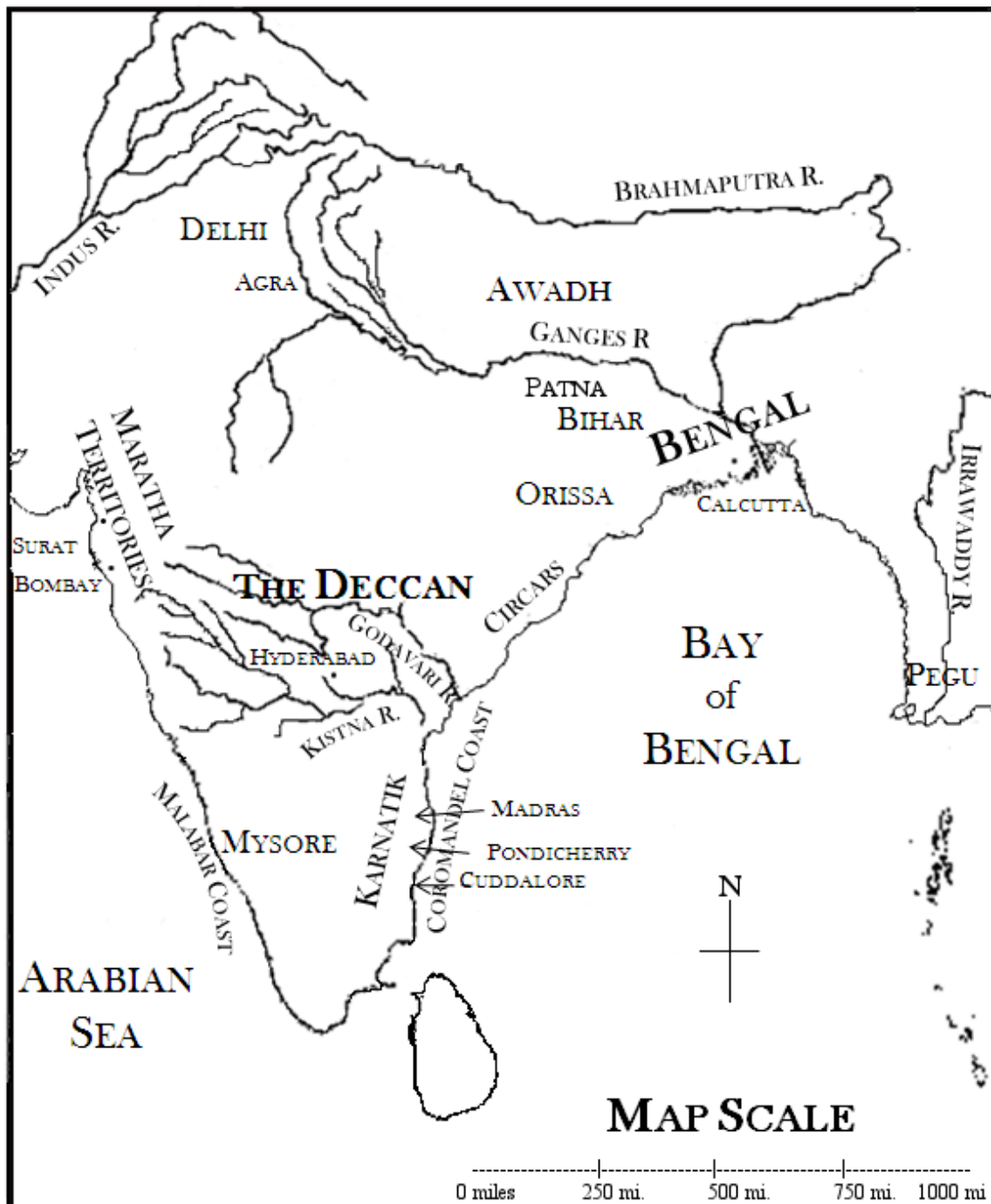
Fig. 1: Regional Map of South Asia in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

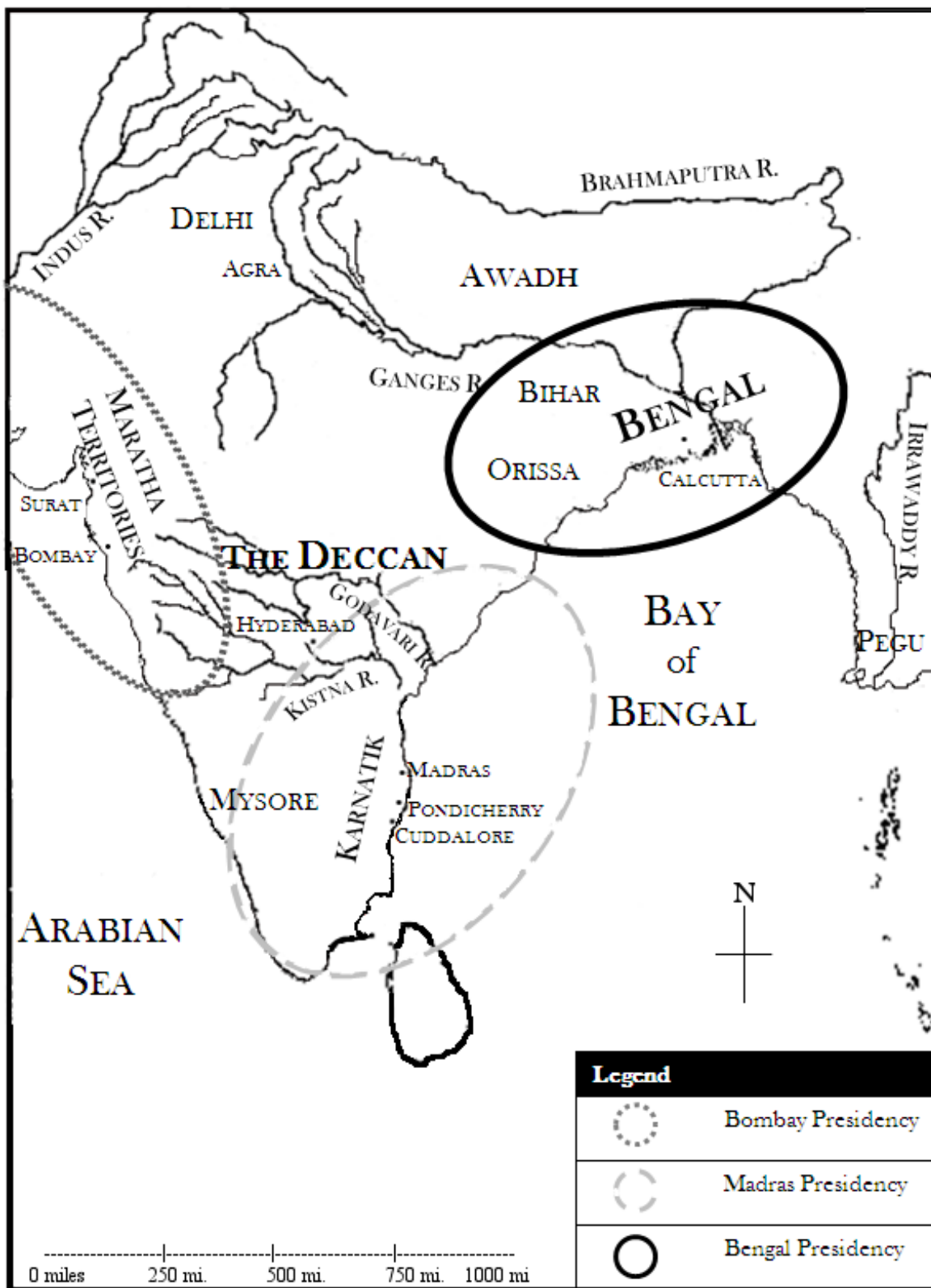**Fig. 2: The Presidencies of the English East India Company**
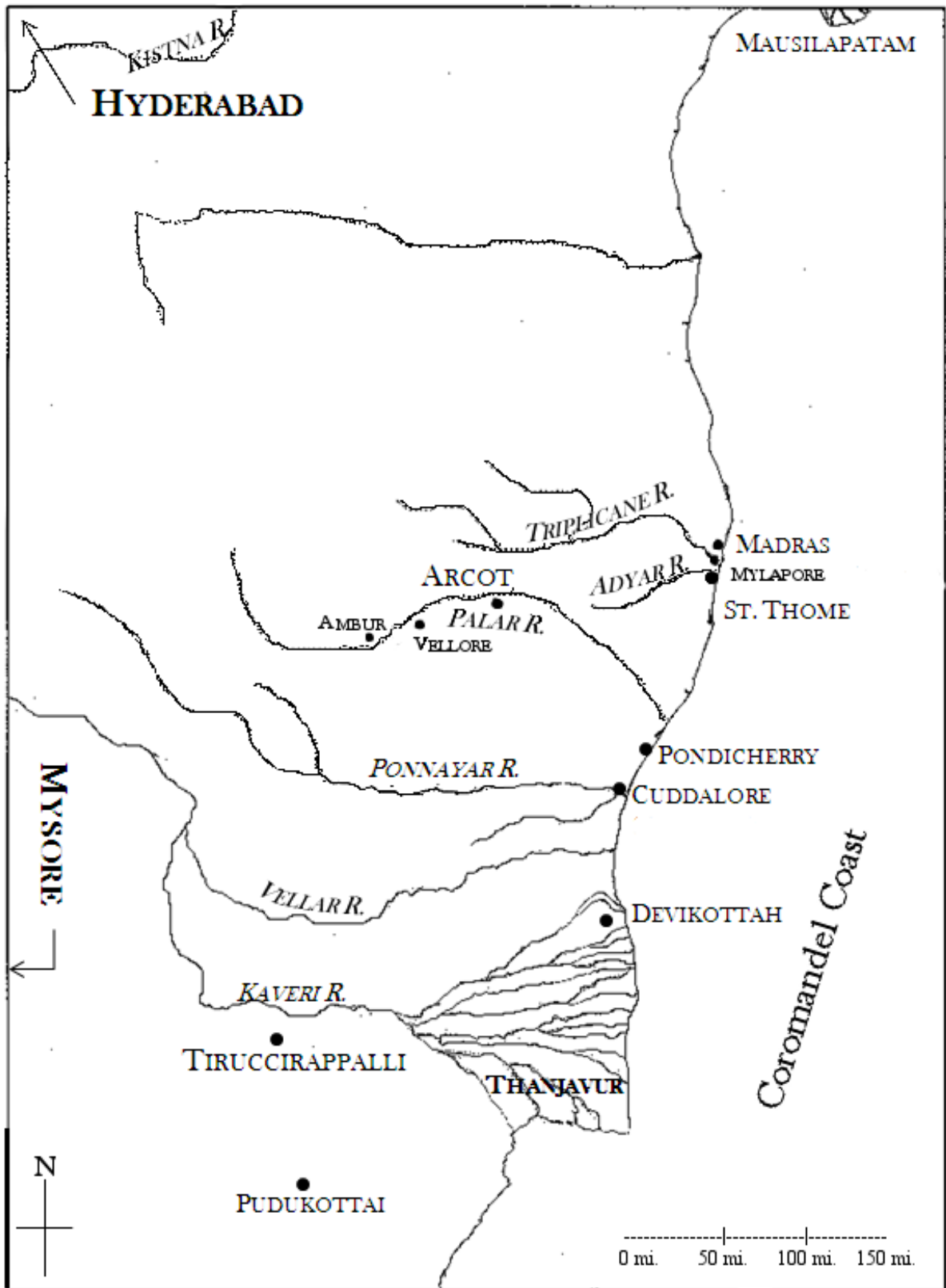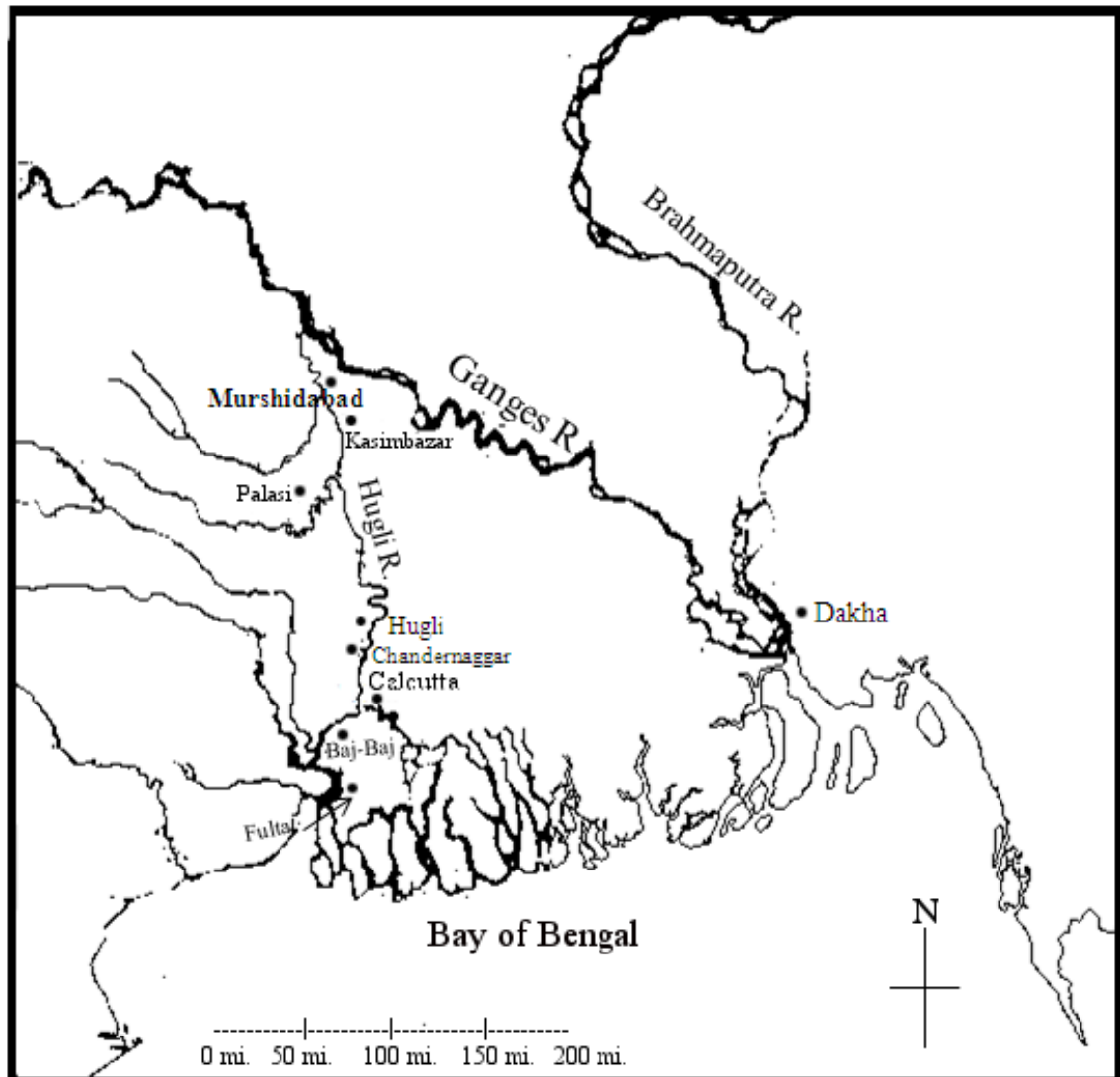
Fig. 3: Map of the Karnatik

Fig. 4: Map of Bengal

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