TRANSACTIONS OF THE
ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By P.J. Marshall

BRITAIN AND THE WORLD IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: III, BRITAIN AND INDIA

READ ON 26 NOVEMBER 1999

THESE addresses have been trying to explore the obvious paradox in eighteenth-century Britain's fortunes overseas: a North American empire, as I suggested last year, deeply rooted in the rich soil of a close-knit transatlantic community, was to come crashing down in the gale unleashed by the new imperial anxieties and ambitions of Britain's rulers. A British empire was, however, to be successfully planted in the unpromising terrain of alien Asian peoples. It is to the creation of this new Indian empire that I wish now to turn.

To contemporaries at the time and to nearly all historians since, the imperial ventures in west and east seemed to be fundamentally different. They might or might not be included in the fold of Britishness, but Americans were without question part of the same European and specifically British world. They had shared in the great developments, scientific rationality, economic productivity, constitutional liberty and, British people reluctantly and lately conceded, military capacity that were believed to have transformed Britain itself. Even those who insisted most strictly on the exercise of an overriding imperial authority recognised that such people could only be governed with their co-operation. Any explanation of the failure of empire must therefore explain why that co-operation had been withheld.

By contrast India seemed to eighteenth-century opinion to be part of a quite different world, largely untouched by the recent experiences of Europe. Indian Muslims were assumed to be sharing in the atrophy that was believed to have sapped all Islamic societies from the Ottoman

empire eastwards, while Hindus were universally supposed to be committed by immovable religious prescription to ancient custom to a degree that made them immune to all outside influences. For the historian Robert Orme, 'Nothing seems to have been wanting to the happiness' of Hindus 'but that others should have looked on them with the same indifference with which they regard the rest of the world. . . . They have always been immensely rich, and always remained incapable of defending their wealth.'[1] Even for Edmund Burke, the most sympathetic public interpreter of India, there was a glaring contrast between 'the improved state of Europe, with the improved state of arts and the improved state of laws, and (what is more material) the improved state of military discipline' and 'the general fall of Asia, and the relaxation and dissolution of its governments, with the fall of its warlike spirit and the total disuse almost of all parts of military discipline'.[2] The military backwardness and lack of political capacity of Indian people were thought to leave them ripe for foreign conquest. The story of the rise of empire in India was thus focused on the imposition of rule on a docile people after the successful application of force at Plassey, Buxar and on many subsequent occasions.

Explanations for India's subordination to Britain, broadly in terms of the stagnation induced by its long isolation that left it incapable of resisting the power of European arms, were generally to hold the field throughout the colonial period. They are now, however, increasingly challenged. Stereotypes of an unchanging India living largely in isolation from the rest of the world until British conquests set off processes of modernisation are generally discredited. Interesting attempts are indeed being made to find common trends affecting early modern Eurasia that make it possible to suggest that Europe and Asia had connected rather than separate histories.[3]

The contrast between west and east, empire based on co-operation and empire based on force, now looks less stark than it did. There were of course fundamental differences between an Asian world directly touched by Europeans only at its peripheries and an Atlantic world shaped by a long process of European settlement. Even so, the creation of a British empire in India now seems to many historians less an

[1] 'Dissertation on the Establishments made by the Mahomedan Conquerors in Indostan' in *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* (2 vols., 1763–78), I, 7–8.

[2] *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. VI, *India: The Launching of the Hastings Impeachment 1786–88*, ed. P.J. Marshall (Oxford, 1991), 283.

[3] See the essays in *Modern Asian Studies*, 31 (1997), especially 463–546, Victor Lieberman, 'Transcending East–West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas', and 735–62, Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 'Connected Histories: Notes Towards the Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia'.

exercise of untrammelled power and more the exertion of power in ways which were profoundly influenced by important elements of Indian society. Both in America and in India the people shaped the imperial system that ruled over them.

Pre-colonial India was much less closely integrated into the British economy than were the West Indian and North American colonies. In the first half of the eighteenth century imports from all Asia to Britain were generally worth less than half the value of those from the Americas and exports from Britain to Asia were only worth about a quarter of those crossing the Atlantic.[4] While a great many individual ships from ports all over the British Isles passed to and from America with multitudes of emigrants as well as with goods, a relatively small number of large ships belonging to the East India Company made the passage round the Cape of Good Hope, and the British subjects resident in Asia could be counted only in hundreds. A convincing case can, however, be made that India was already entering into what has been called an 'international division of labour' linking west and east.[5] The East India Company's trade was one of the main conduits through which India received American silver in the quantities that enabled silver rupees to become the standard currency throughout the Mughal empire. In return India exported the cotton textiles that clothed western Europe and the European and slave populations of the Americas and that were a major item for the West African trade. By one calculation the production of textiles for export through the East India companies increased employment in Bengal, the most important area of production for Europe, by about a tenth.[6] By contrast, the implications of massive Indian textile imports for European employment were stark and produced popular disorder and protective legislation in Britain and France.[7]

India's role in international trade in the early modern period was built on what many historians describe as an indigenous commercial capitalism which had evolved on its own momentum, but had similarities

[4] See tables in Jacob M. Price, 'The Imperial Economy, 1700–1776', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. P.J. Marshall, vol. II, *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 101.

[5] Frank Perlin's phrase, 'Proto-industrialisation and Pre-colonial South Asia', *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), 60.

[6] Om Prakash, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II, 5, *European Commercial Enterprise in pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 317. For criticism of this estimate, see Sushil Chaudhury, 'European Trading Companies and the Bengal Textile Industry in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: The Pitfalls of Applying Quantitative Methods', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), 321–40.

[7] Michel Morineau, 'The Indian Challenge, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' in *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Sushil Chaudhury and M. Morineau (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 243–75.

to that of pre-industrial Europe.[8] In most parts of India cultivators sold surplus crops for cash which they used to pay their taxes. There was a very large internal trade in agricultural produce, many commodities also being exported by sea. The textiles shipped to Europe were only a small part of a huge output for markets within India and for other parts of Asia. These trades depended to a large extent on credit extended by merchants who operated both at the level of local village markets and in great trading ports, where they owned ships that carried Indian goods throughout maritime Asia from the Persian Gulf to southern China. Banking businesses remitted money by bills of exchange across India.

There seems also to have been a degree of political as well as of economic convergence between the trajectories of early modern India and early modern Europe. Commercial expansion in India had made it possible for Europeans to become participants in its coastal economies during the seventeenth century; political changes in the eighteenth century were to enable Europeans to exert military and ultimately state power inland.

An overarching Mughal imperial system for most of India gave way in the eighteenth century to a series of what amounted to regional states, often based on a degree of distinct ethnic and cultural identity. To contemporary British observers and to subsequent historians these changes were a story of decline and fall. To quote Burke again, 'Viceroys grew into independence, partly by the dreadful calamities and concussions of that Empire. ... Then the Princes became independent, but their independence led to their ruin.'[9] This was the tone of nearly all nineteenth-and most twentieth-century historiography. The replacement of the Mughals by a fragmenting of authority is now, however, not necessarily seen as evidence of political failure or of a slide into disorder, but rather as a process of evolution towards what has even been called a 'more "modern" ' order in India.[10] The successor states, it is argued, had existed in embryo within a Mughal system that had never exerted a tightly centralised control.[11] In a process of decentralisation new states emerged that were more capable than the Mughals had been of effectively tapping the wealth being generated by

[8] Perlin, 'Proto-industrialisation', 33; David Washbrook, 'South Asia, the World System and World Capitalism' in *South Asia and World Capitalism*, ed. Sugata Bose (Delhi, 1990), 60; K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 208–14.

[9] *Writings and Speeches*, VI, 311.

[10] D.A. Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History *c*. 1720–1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), 68.

[11] For a recent statement of this view, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'L'état Moghol et sa fiscalité, xvi^{e}–xviii^{e} siècles', *Annales: histoire, sciences sociales*, 49 (1994), 189–217.

increased agricultural output and a greater volume of trade. Tax yields were enhanced by more rigorous local administration and by involving moneyed men in bidding to collect them. Trade was more closely regulated by the state and taxed more heavily. Most of the new rulers also borrowed from bankers in advance of their tax revenues. Higher tax yields and ready money advanced by bankers enabled states to spend more heavily on professional armies. There is thus some resemblance at least between regimes in India and Europe that were maximising the yield of their tax resources and using the capacity of the state to borrow to the full in order to enhance their military power. Historians of India are willing to apply the concept of a 'military-fiscal state' to some of the new entities of the eighteenth century.[12]

Europeans were able first to gain influence within some of these new states and later to adapt them to their own purposes as they assumed authority over them. Many recent interpretations of the eighteenth century stress the strong continuities between the indigenous regimes succeeding the Mughals and the early rule of the British East India Company. It too was built on taxes rigorously collected and used to maintain large armies. These interpretations also stress the role of Indian agency, however unwittingly, in the rise of the British to dominance and in shaping the new colonial order. Power was won by forming alliances with Indian groups and was at first largely exercised through Indian intermediaries.

A number of distinguished scholars are not at all persuaded by such interpretations of the eighteenth century in India. They still see a qualitative difference for the worse between the great empire that collapsed and the mostly transitory regional states that succeeded it. These states were too weak to stand against what was in their view a violent foreign conquest that established an entirely new predatory colonial order.[13]

That coercion was a major element in European dealings with Indians throughout the eighteenth century cannot be denied. Even early in the century, Europeans periodically resorted to violence at sea to enforce their commercial objectives. In mid-century rulers in Bengal were elevated or deposed at the point of British bayonets. At the end of the century massive deployments of British troops destroyed the

[12] Notably Burton Stein, 'State Formation and Economy Reconsidered', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), 387–413.

[13] M. Athar Ali, 'Recent Theories of Eighteenth-century India', *Indian Historical Review*, 8 (1987), 102–10; Z. U. Malik, 'The Core and the Periphery: A Contribution to the Debate on the Eighteenth Century', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 51st Session* (Calcutta, 1990), 169–99; Irfan Habib, 'The Eighteenth Century in Indian Economic History', in *On the Eighteenth Century as a Category of Asian History: Van Leur in Retrospect*, ed. Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra (Aldershot, 1998), 217–36.

Mysore state and were threatening the Marathas. Yet at every stage accommodations between British and Indian interests were also crucial to the rise of British ascendancy. Accommodations were based on the self-interest of both sides. To achieve any objective, be it commercial, military or political, Indian assistance was indispensable to Europeans who were able to offer valuable services to certain groups in Indian society in return for this assistance.

The pattern of accommodation had been set in seaborne trade in the seventeenth century. Europeans depended on the toleration of Indian rulers to establish themselves at first with the customary immunities of other mercantile communities. In some cases these immunities were gradually extended until they were turned into enclaves under European authority. Recognition that Europeans brought in bullion and certain valued commodities as well as generating wealth and employment seem to have disposed rulers to put up with such intrusions. The British resident in India of necessity maintained very close relations with Indian commercial communities. The Company obtained its goods through networks of merchants and brokers. Private British merchants traded by sea in ships built in India, largely sailed by Indian crews, often financed by money borrowed from Indians and carrying a high proportion of freight for Indian clients. Europeans in return were important customers of Indian merchants, offering them valuable services as shippers of goods and skills as ships' commanders, navigators and gunners.

British–Indian commercial collaboration in the pursuit of advantages for both sides continued for some years after the first conquests. In exploiting the immediate opportunities opened to them by political power, such as diverting state revenues into private pockets or imposing control over certain trades for their own advantage, Europeans were at first largely dependent on the finance and expertise of Indian businessmen, who acted as their agents; these were the banians of Bengal or dubashes of Madras. Such people profited greatly, often becoming richer than their nominal masters. As the Company's armies began to wage war all over India, they depended on the great Indian banking businesses, especially on those based at Benares, for remitting the funds for the regular payments on which the loyalty of the troops depended.[14]

From the sixteenth century at least, Indian rulers had begun to value European skills in land warfare as well as at sea. Numerous Europeans were employed as artillery men and in the armouries of Mughal armies. During the eighteenth century European and Indian military systems

[14] Lakshmi Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast* (Delhi, 1996).

began to converge closely. Some of the successor states to the Mughals developed armies along European lines, deploying massed infantry drilled and armed in the European manner. The demand for European officers and artificers increased. As the British and French began to fight one another on a scale that approximated to contemporary European warfare, they had of necessity to enter what has been called 'the Indian military labour market' to recruit the sepoys that provided the major part of their infantry.[15] At first sepoys served under Indian officers, like the remarkable Yusuf Khan, appointed by the British as 'commander of all the sepoys rais'd and employ'd … on the Coast of Coromandel' in the 1750s and entrusted with important administrative responsibilities as well.[16] By the end of the century Indian officers had been systematically demoted to make way for the now ubiquitous British ones. Yet the Company armies were still distinctly British–Indian ones. The sepoys served on their own terms. The soldiers of the Bengal army in particular developed a privileged status, defining themselves as a high-caste force to which only what they deemed to be appropriate recruits were acceptable and whose traditions of diet, festivals and other conditions of service had to be observed by the Company.[17]

Merchants had a strictly subordinate place in the ideal order of Mughal governance. Yet in southern India from the sixteenth century, and in the eighteenth century in some of the states that emerged from Mughal rule elsewhere, sharp distinctions between trade and finance, on the one hand, and politics and administration, on the other, were being eroded. Aristocrats augmented their wealth through trade and merchants sought profits from farming state revenues. Mir Jumla, a person of Persian origin, who traded extensively by sea, managed a large proportion of the revenue of the kingdom of Golconda and ended his life as a general of the emperor Aurangzeb, is a conspicuous early example.[18] Later ones are the great merchants such as the brothers 'Omichand' (Amirchand) and Deepchand or Khwaja Wajeed, who served the nawabs of Bengal as managers of the saltpetre and salt trades of Bihar and sought political interest at the nawabs' court to protect their investments.[19] Individual Europeans aspired to play similar

[15] Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan 1450–1850* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176–81.

[16] H.H. Dodwell, *Sepoy Recruitment in the Old Madras Army* (Calcutta, 1922), 7. See also Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 194–9.

[17] Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770–1830* (Delhi, 1995), chap. 2.

[18] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 322–7.

[19] Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India: Bihar 1733–1820* (Leiden, 1996), 71–100.

roles and to diversify their trading interests by profiting from the resources of Indian states. In the later seventeenth century Englishmen collected revenue from small grants of coastal land in southern India.[20] In the eighteenth century individual Frenchmen were doing the same.[21] Dupleix and Bussy received huge grants of territory in the 1750s, allocated to them personally, from the revenue of which they were to maintain forces for the service of those who were trying to establish themselves as the *subahdars* of the Deccan.[22]

Their involvement in Indian states gave Europeans the opportunities to intervene decisively in the 1750s, both in the south and in Bengal, backing claimants to thrones or conspiracies to depose rulers. Intervention quickly led to the subordination of the Carnatic and to the effective incorporation of Bengal into the British empire. Europeans at once began to refer to these changes as a 'revolution'. For a considerable time, however, many Indians appear to have believed that what in retrospect seems so palpably to have been leading to an entirely new order might in fact be a continuation of the late-Mughal one into which the British could be absorbed and made to serve Indian purposes.

Some Indian rulers were indeed able to manipulate British power to their own purposes. In the Carnatic, Muhammad Ali Khan, Nawab of Arcot, usually assumed to be a hapless puppet at the mercy of the imperious commands issued to him from Madras or of the intrigues of Europeans at his court, was able to use the shield of British protection to extend his territory and to develop, in the words of a recent scholar, 'a tradition of kingship which was authentically Islamic'.[23] The Wazirs of Awadh also used British force to win and consolidate a great extension of territory in Rohilkhand. They worked out mechanisms for limiting the effect of British demands and they too developed an Islamic monarchy, if of a rather different kind, in their new capital at Lucknow.[24]

In Bengal within a few years of Plassey and in other provinces by the end of the century, Indian authority had patently given way to foreign rule. Yet the foreigners seem to have had little difficulty in inducing the kind of men who had served the Mughal regimes to apply their skills and impart their knowledge. For some, notably in the early stages of conquest in Bengal, great wealth could be accumulated under

[20] Elizabeth Saxe, 'Fortune's Tangled Web: Trading Networks of English Entrepreneurs in Eastern India, 1657–1717' (Ph. D. thesis Yale University, 1978), 42, 69–70.

[21] Catherine Manning, *Fortunes à faire: The French in Asian Trade, 1719–48* (Aldershot, 1996), 211.

[22] Alfred Martineau, *Bussy et l'Inde française* (Paris, 1935), 140–8; H.H. Dodwell, *Dupleix and Clive: The Beginning of Empire* (London, 1920), 86.

[23] S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 171.

[24] Richard B. Barnett, *North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, 1980); Michael H. Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British and the Mughals* (New Delhi, 1988).

the aegis of ignorant foreigners. Ganga Govind Singh administered the revenues of Bengal under Warren Hastings, and in the process built up a fortune that some Europeans estimated in millions of pounds sterling.[25] But material reward seems not to have been the only motive for serving the Company. There are indications that the British were not at first seen as foreigners who were qualitatively different from others, more or less alien, who held power in India. The loyalty of Indian administrators, especially if they were Muslims, was first and foremost to an ideal of governance, which was that of the Mughal empire, and it was their duty to try to make those actually vested with power conform to these ideals, to which even the British nominally paid homage. They had after all received the *diwani* of Bengal as the emperor's 'faithful servants' in consideration of their 'attachment and services' to him.[26] Of Muhammad Reza Khan, the minister who ran Bengal for the British in the 1760s, it has been written that 'his constant aim … was to persuade his English masters to accept Mughal ideas as their own'.[27] 'Room had been found in the past for all nationalities in the imperial service; there was no reason why the English should not be found a place.'[28] They were granted Mughal titles. Some Company servants were not oblivious of the obligations that went with their titles. Among Warren Hastings's titles was *Aman al-Daula*, 'security of the state'. He never performed the duties implied by this title to the Mughal emperor in person (indeed he did him a major disservice by cancelling his stipend from Bengal), but he did encounter the emperor's eldest son when he fled to Lucknow in 1784. Hastings then rode behind the prince's elephant on his entry into the city and was later depicted sitting apparently deferentially at his feet in a coloured sketch by Zoffany, who was in Lucknow at the time. Hastings was strongly tempted, he confessed, to try to restore the prince to Delhi by British military force, 'an Act which would have reflected a lasting Honor on my reputation in India'.[29]

Hopes that men such as Hastings might be absorbed into an Indian

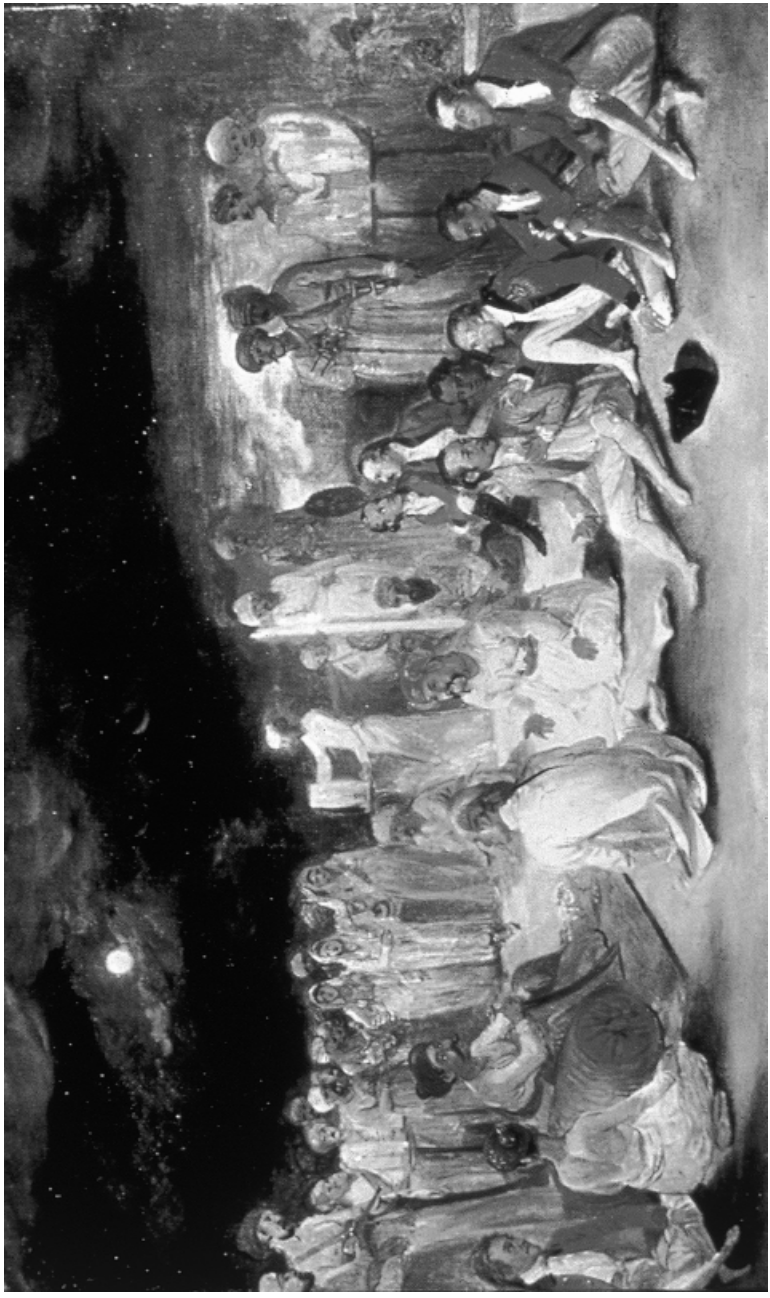
[25] 'Indian Officials under the East India Company in eighteenth-century Bengal' in P.J. Marshall, *Trade and Conquest: Studies on the Rise of British Dominance in India* (Aldershot, 1993).

[26] C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sunnuds Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (6 vols., Calcutta, 1862–4), I, 60.

[27] Abdul Majed Khan, *The Transition in Bengal, 1756–1775: A Study of Muhammad Reza Khan* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 16.

[28] Ibid., p. 12. A similar point is made in C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86. For reactions to the British as aliens, see Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as Self-Representation: The Recasting of a Political Tradition in Late Eighteenth-Century Eastern India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 32 (1998), 913–48.

[29] Sydney C. Grier, *The Letters of Warren Hastings to his Wife* (Edinburgh, 1905), 302. Hastings recorded his various meetings with the prince at Lucknow from May to August 1784 in his diary, B[ritish] L[ibrary], Add MS. 39879.



Prince Jawan Bakht and Warren Hastings at Lucknow, 1784

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440100000013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

polity and be made to serve Indian purposes were not quite as futile as they seem in retrospect. Europeans had been absorbed into Indian systems in the past and were to continue to be so absorbed well into the nineteenth century. Numerous Portuguese 'renegades' or mercenaries had sought service with Indian rulers.[30] Bussy was for a time effectively minister of the Nizam of Hyderabad.[31] At the end of the eighteenth century the Piedmontese de Boigne and the Frenchman Perron commanded the troops of the Maratha Mahadaji Sindhia and held huge estates from him in northern India. Various Europeans and Americans held high military commands under Ranjit Singh of the Panjab in the early nineteenth century. Even if it was hardly conceivable that they would formally renounce their allegiance to the Company, senior British Company servants in the mid-eighteenth century were under only tenuous control from home and their support could often be bought by Indian grandees who were prepared to pay generously enough. Was it therefore unreasonable for Mir Jafar to expect great future services after Plassey for the nawabs of Bengal from the lavishly rewarded Robert Clive, for whom he had a paternal regard and who was after his death to tell his Begam that 'I consider myself and all the English Gentleman to be your highness's children and that we regard you as our mother'?[32]

Clive, however, was one of those men in crucial positions who would ensure that the British East India Company would remain an alien force in India pursuing ultimately alien objectives. For such people the making of money was of course a preoccupation of the highest importance, but money was not an end in itself; it was to enable them to take appropriate positions in British society. Clive and Hastings were typical in their strong sense of locality and their ambition to restore or recover ancestral property, Styche in Shropshire for Clive and Daylesford in the Cotswolds for Hastings. Both men, however, wanted rather more than honourable retirement in local society. They and others like them who had risen high in the service were conscious that they were serving the nation and not just a trading company. In the wars of the 1750s they had successfully defended important British commercial interests against the French and against Indian enemies. 'There is no part of the world in which British arms have, of late years, acquired more honour' than in India, wrote Robert Orme, the Company servants' own historian.[33] Clive's success at Plassey was indeed

[30] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (1993), 249–61.

[31] Martineau, *Bussy*, 140.

[32] Brajenranath Banerji, 'The Mother of the Company', *Bengal Past and Present*, 32 (1926), 46.

[33] *Military Transactions in Indostan*, I, 34.

to be commemorated as a national triumph together with three other huge pictures – pantheons of admirals and generals and a depiction of the surrender of Montreal – by Francis Hayman for the Rotunda in Vauxhall Gardens.[34] With the gains made by the wars and the grant of the Bengal *diwani*, the Company's governors were well aware that they were administering a huge national asset that could confer great advantages on Britain but whose loss could cripple British commerce and credit.

Public recognition and rewards should follow great services. Victory at Plassey turned Clive's hopes to 'getting into Parliament' and to 'being taken some Notice of by his Majesty'.[35] There is 'no other interest in this kingdom but what arises from great possessions', he was later to write.[36] Hastings wrote early in his government that he had 'catched the desire of applause in public life' and that he wished to be esteemed 'in the general opinion of mankind'.[37] He confessed to 'a more than ordinary degree of ambition to act in an elevated sphere under my sovereign and to recommend myself more and more to his favour'.[38]

It was impossible for those who sought wealth, reputation and advancement in India not to see themselves as acting on a global stage of British interests. Although there is little to suggest that Clive and the others who intervened so forcefully in the affairs of Indian states in the 1750s did so with any sense of incorporating the gains that they made into a world-wide British empire, as the consequences of their intervention became apparent it was an outcome that they quickly accepted. As early as 1759 in his well-known letter to Pitt, Clive raised the possibility of 'the nation's assistance' being required 'to maintain so wide a dominion' in India.[39] The nature of this dominion was to be defined by men in India rather than at home.[40]

What the East India Company had acquired in India was a series of rights, conditional on rendering service and with other rights parallel to them or overlapping them. The Company held land around Madras as a *jagir*, technically a grant of revenue for the maintenance of troops. The so-called Northern Circars were at first an *inam* or gift from the

[34] Brian Allen, *Francis Hayman* (New Haven, 1987), 68–9.

[35] G.W. Forrest, *The Life of Robert, Lord Clive* (2 vols., 1918), II, 37.

[36] Cited in Philip Lawson and Bruce Lenman, 'Robert Clive, "the Black Jagir" and British Politics', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), 813.

[37] G.R. Gleig, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Warren Hastings* (3 vols., 1841), I, 375.

[38] Ibid., I, 472.

[39] Forrest, *Clive*, II, 176.

[40] The uncertainties of opinion at home are brought out in Huw V. Bowen, 'A Question of Sovereignty? The Bengal Land Revenue Issue, 1765–67', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 16 (1988), 155–76.

Mughal emperor and then held by treaty with the Nizam of Hyderabad, which required the Company to maintain troops for his support and to pay him a subsidy when troops were not required.[41] In Bengal the Company had at first acquired *zamindari* rights to collect revenue in and around Calcutta. After 1765 they acted as the emperor's *diwan*. Formally their duties as *diwan* were separate from the duties of the *nazim*, vested in the nawabs of Bengal, and they were subject to checks by officials directly responsible to the emperor.

Leading Company servants had little patience with these ambiguous complexities.[42] They seem to have believed that they had won for Britain dominions comparable to those in other parts of the world. Like those who planned reforms in America, they thought in terms of sovereignty backed by effective military power. The Mughals had, in their view, been sovereigns over their empire. During the eighteenth century that sovereignty had been usurped and, as Clive put it, 'absolute' sovereignty had passed to the provincial governors or nawabs. Plassey had given the British 'absolute power' over Bengal.[43] He wrote in 1759 of 'so large a sovereignty' in Bengal in the hands of the Company.[44] On the way back to India in 1764 he reflected on the possibility of 'making such strides to power and dominion as must I think end in parliamentary inquiry and a national dominion'.[45] The grant of the *diwani* eliminated any doubts about the matter in his mind. 'All must belong either to the Company or to the Nabob' and now it clearly belonged to the Company. 'The power is lodged where it can only be lodged with safety to us'.[46] Hastings used almost identical language in his evidence to the House of Commons in 1767. The nawabs of Bengal had the 'powers of [a] Sovereign independant of [the] Mogul', but now 'The Company is Master of the power and may be Master of the Government and it is out of the Nabobs power to controul them.'[47] As Governor after 1772 he was in no doubt that 'the sovereignty of this country [is] wholly and absolutely vested in the Company',[48] a view that he upheld uncompromisingly thereafter.

Sovereignty must be asserted by military power, the first priority of

[41] Aitchison, *Collection*, V, 12–18.

[42] See the discussion in C.A. Bayly, 'The British Military-Fiscal State and Indigenous Resistance: India 1750–1820' in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi, 1998), 241–51.

[43] *A Letter to the Proprietors of East India Stock from Lord Clive* (1764), 36, 46.

[44] Forrest, *Clive*, II, 176.

[45] Letter to George Grenville, 14 Oct. 1764, Huntington Library, MS HM 31637.

[46] *Fort William–India House Correspondence*, 14, *1752–81*, ed. Ambar Prasad (Delhi, 1985), 174.

[47] BL, Add MS, 18469, fos. 26–7.

[48] Gleig, *Hastings*, I, 393.

the raj from 1757 until 1947. Now it was 'in your power to be as great as you please in the kingdom of Bengal', Clive told the Directors immediately after Plassey. 'The sinews of war are in your own possession, and there wants nothing but supplies of men and military stores to keep up your priviledges and acquisitions.'[49] The acceptance of the *diwani* was accompanied by plans for an enlarged army which quickly came into being. In the south the Madras Council reflected that the Company's objectives were 'formerly wholly Commercial' now had 'become partly Commercial and partly Military'. Therefore 'that Reputation which the Company's Arms have justly acquired' must be maintained by using their army to overawe any power within the Carnatic that might presume to 'hopes of Independence'.[50]

Military force enabled the Company servants to subordinate all competing claims to authority within what they regarded as their territory. The Company's army was to be the only military force in Bengal. The troops of the nawabs were quickly disbanded. The armed men kept up by the Bengal *zamindars* to sustain their standing as local potentates were dispersed. British troops enabled the Nawab of Arcot to extend his authority over the *poligars* and 'little kingdoms' of the south at the price of dismantling of most of his own forces and his total reliance on the British as his protectors.[51] The army of the Wazir of Awadh was considerably reduced and the main task of defending his territory or coercing his subjects passed to British garrisons.

The ambitions of the new Company regimes that were claiming and enforcing an absolute authority were at first largely confined to securing commercial advantages and to maximising revenues, above all to pay for their large military establishments. The consequences of closer control over the textiles being produced for export or of the distribution of commodities like salt and opium and of an enhanced revenue demand, where it could be realised, were no doubt immediate and severe for considerable sections of the population now under British rule. Yet neither the personnel involved in government, except at the highest levels, nor the manner in which it operated changed significantly in the early years. These were still recognisably Indian regimes dependent on Indian expertise. Continuity with the past was real enough, even if the potential for change in the future was equally apparent.

One of the scholars who is sceptical of the current tendency to interpret

[49] *Fort William–India House Correspondence*, II, *1757–59*, ed. H.N. Sinha (Delhi, 1957), 250.

[50] To Directors, 3 Sept. 1763, BL, Oriental and India Office Collections E/4/300, fo. 211.

[51] Jim Phillips, 'A Successor to the Moguls: the Nawab of the Carnatic and the East India Company, 1763–1785', *International History Review*, 7 (1985), 364–89.

the rise of British dominance in India in the eighteenth century in evolutionary terms has written that 'colonialism had blue-blooded European ancestry' and that the new British regimes were 'essentially different' in their 'nature and objectives' from anything that had gone before.[52] If 'colonialism' is interpreted in strictly eighteenth-century terms, there is much to be said for this point of view. The Company's regime was acting on the same assumptions and pursuing the same objectives as British colonial governments elsewhere. The British in India in the age of Clive and Hastings were on the way to achieving much of what British governments were failing to achieve in America. In India the flow of trade between metropole and overseas territory was now safeguarded by strong military forces at the disposal of a local executive claiming to act with a sovereign authority that could override autonomies and privileges in the territory under its control. These were the objectives of a British parliamentary state, not of rulers who adhered to Mughal traditions.

Other parts of the argument for the imposition of an essentially alien colonial regime in the mid-eighteenth century are less convincing. The objectives of the new regime once in power may indeed have been distinctively British but the means by which power was won and was at first exercised were still Indian. Denials that the British had owed much to 'compromises and collaboration with certain indigenous groups and classes' invest them with a capacity to determine events which they manifestly did not possess.[53] Eighteenth-century India was not the inert victim of overwhelming force from a more 'advanced' civilisation. It was not differences but increasing similarities between Indian and European conditions that the British could exploit. But to do so they had to render services that were acceptable, in the short run, to important elements in Indian society. Even when a military apparatus was created capable of subduing opposition within the Company's territories and more uncertainly, as early wars with the Marathas and Mysore showed, of trying to impose its will outside them, it was still built on Indian taxation, Indian finance, Indian administrative expertise and Indian soldiers.

British ambitions spanned the world in the later eighteenth century. Their objectives, commercial advantage, military security and clearly recognised authority, were essentially the same in America and in India. In America it is beyond question that these objectives could only be achieved with the active co-operation of large sections of the colonial population. In India too such objectives could only be realised if local allies could be found. As I suggested in my first address, the story of

[52] M. Athar Ali, 'Recent Theories of Eighteenth-Century India', 109.
[53] Ibid., 108.

Britain's rise to global supremacy needs to be more than an analysis of Britain's undoubted strengths. Whether these strengths could be used effectively or not ultimately depended on the dispositions of the peoples whom the British encountered in a world that was changing in both west and east in ways that were largely beyond the comprehension of contemporaries and, it must be said, are little clearer to us. We can perhaps, though, be reasonably sure that easy explanations, such as an immobile and vulnerable Asia or the irresistible march of the European world economy armed with a superior technology, will tell us relatively little.