The Emergence of British Power in India, 1600-1784: A Grand Strategic Interpretation

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Over the past decade, and particularly in the last few years, there has been a resurgence of scholarly and popular interest in the history of British imperial involvement in India. Especially marked has been the attention paid to the early colonial period – and to the British East India Company in general – prior to the establishment of a military-political hegemony after the turn of the 19th century. The early Company historian Philip J. Stern has observed that, in part, this sudden popular enthusiasm may be traced not only to the appearance of the Company in a series of blockbuster films and computer games, but also to its deeper connection and identification with the concerns of modern society. The Company, Stern claims, has become an ‘exemplar of the vices, and for some the virtues, of colonialism, globalization and ... the power of multinational capitalism’.⁽¹⁾ Aside from popular histories and trade books, professional historians have found inventive ways to look at issues around the Company’s colonial rule. Robert Travers and Jon Wilson have investigated pre-colonial continuities and British constructions in the edifice of the Company state, and Stern himself has broken new ground in his demonstration that Company officials were administering their own state-like structures in India long before the conventionally accepted turn towards colonial governance in the mid-18th century.

In many ways, G. J. Bryant’s *Emergence of British Power* sits apart from current historiographical trends in its concern with the military-political grand strategy of the fledgling Company state, rather than with the intellectual history of that state’s development and the manner in which its governance was conceptualised by Company servants. Indeed, the book marks something of a departure from recent investigations, adopting a more traditional methodology and scope. From the outset, Bryant makes it clear that this book will not attempt to impose a ‘fashionable structuralist framework on events based on generalist social scientific concepts’ (p. ix). Rather, in ‘getting to the nub ... of the evolution and reality of grand strategy in early British India’, he sets out to examine the Company’s European elite, ‘evaluating the roles, opinions and contributions of only a small number of individuals at the top of government’ (p. x). Bryant focuses ‘on the level above operational military history, that is, a discussion of the political policies adopted by the

Company with its limited financial means ... to achieve the aims of its evolving grand strategy and the nature of the grand strategy itself' (p. 23).

In terms of structure, the book is divided into two overlapping chronological sections. The first ('Dealing with the French menace, 1744–61') details a 'reactive-defensive phase', during which the Company's military planning was preoccupied by the threat posed by its European rivals; the second ('Towards an All-India grand strategy, 1762–84') deals with the prosecution of offensive campaigns against Indian 'country' powers, and the problems of securing conquered territory (p. 29). Within these two sections are nine chapters which serve as case studies of specific phases within the development of the Company's military presence, as well as dealing chronologically with major operations of the period and attempting to place them in a grand strategic context. Bryant begins by emphasising the connections between European military activity in India and events elsewhere in the world, with the opening chapters of the first section framing operations on the subcontinent as part of the wider global conflicts of the mid-18th century: the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8) and the Seven Years' War (1756–63). Later chapters in this section cover the fraught military situation in mid-century Madras, and the operations undertaken as part of the 'Revolution in Bengal' which saw the Company acquire the *diwani* (revenue-collecting privileges) of the province in 1765, the conventional beginning of the switch in emphasis from trade to dominion. The early chapters of the second section are concerned with the Company's consolidation of Bengal during the 1770s and 1780s, and with the expansion of its territory through conflict with other Indian polities. The final chapters of the book – under the title 'Three wars on five fronts' – examines the collective action of the three presidencies (Bengal, Bombay and Madras) and seeks to determine the extent to which the Company's planners demonstrated an awareness of grand strategic concepts in securing its Indian empire.

As is suggested by the title, this issue of whether the Company adopted a grand strategy, primarily in the mid- to late-18th century, is the central concern of the book. Was this truly 'grand strategy'? And, if so, what were its grand strategic objectives? 'Grand strategy' as a term 'did not exist in the 18th-century political lexicon and the concept was not formally recognised under any other formulation' (p. x), yet the situation in which the Company found itself, Bryant argues, was one which seems to cry out for the development of a grand strategy, however articulated. It was necessary for the Company to blend diplomatic and military measures in its relations with rival powers, to secure and consolidate territory, and to manage limited financial resources and personnel, all in widely separated theatres of operation. For Bryant, the Company's planners 'wrestled ineffectually' with these challenges throughout the period covered by the book (p. xiv).

Bryant argues that deep-seated divisions within the British presence – military, geographical, and political – militated against the implementation of a grand strategy. One example is the friction between Crown and Company forces. Close ties with the British government allowed the Company the support of the British state's armed forces, but this brought its own problems, with co-operation between Crown and Company officers impeded by disputes over seniority. While Crown officers may have lacked the India-specific knowledge of their Company colleagues, they automatically enjoyed seniority over any Company officer of nominally equivalent rank. Disputes reached such an intensity that it was proposed (unsuccessfully) to ship drafts of Crown soldiers, without their officers, to India, where they would be placed under direct Company control (p. 78). However, even though the relationship between the private and public military arms was often fractious, relations between the Company and the Royal Navy remained cordial, and this, Bryant argues, was vital to the success of British arms in India. The Company's own navy – the Bombay Marine – was not capable of meeting its strategic goals, especially if those goals were along the eastern coast of India; and the small size of the Marine provided much less opportunity for damaging disagreements to arise between Company and Crown naval officers. The Royal Navy not only provided an important link with Europe, channelling men and material to the Indian theatre; its mobility also helped to overcome the problems of distance which hampered the Company's India-wide operations, allowing the strategic projection of military forces at an enemy's weak points, as well as enabling blockade and commerce-raiding to reduce that enemy's capacity to resist (pp. 36–7). But this limited co-operation between Crown and Company is not evidence of the operation of a true grand strategy.

Crucially, the Company's sub-continental power structure was tripartite, split between the presidencies; and Bryant demonstrates that bringing scanty resources to bear in an effective manner required (but did not often produce) a high level of co-operation between the Company's separate authorities at Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Unlike its French rivals, the Company had no centralised high command in India until the late 18th century, with the Directors reluctant to transfer too much political power to its men on the spot, lest they attempted any really wide-ranging campaigns and over-reached themselves, harming the Company's delicate position in India (p. 79). Having failed to provide the presidencies with any immediate supreme leadership, the attempts by the central authorities in Britain to direct events in India were rendered largely ineffective by the enormous distances involved, with it being quite possible for a year to elapse between a message being sent to Calcutta and a reply received in London. The elevation of Warren Hastings in 1773 and, to a much greater extent, the augmentation of the Governor-General's powers by Pitt's India Act in 1784, made provision for an effective strategic co-ordinator. Until that point, however, Bryant shows that divisions within the Indian theatre, and distrust between the Directors and their colonial servants, reduced the chance of those servants acting in concert to implement a grand strategic response to any crisis which arose.

Ultimately, Bryant poses the question 'Through an examination of their grand strategy, can it be said that, before 1784, the British evolved a conscious imperial ambition to dominate India?', and he responds with a firm 'no' (p. 325). His argument is that, while the Company may have been exhibiting behaviour suggestive of a developing grand strategy – such as nascent co-operation across the Indian theatre between Company and Crown, between presidencies, and between the diplomatic, military, and naval arms – any sense of 'grand strategic "mission" or "purpose" at the time was blurred for many by the fact that the Company was ruled by a *commercial* not a *political* government (or a hybrid of the two)' (p. 328). That is to say, the growth of its power in India from the mid-18th century did not occur with a strategic end in view, unless the 'prime objective ... always to make money' can be considered such (p. 328). Company servants 'increasingly and consciously engaged in "imperialist" behaviour with pecuniary motivation, reacting to immediate local events, but without much collective perception of where it might lead in the long run' (p. 325).

In terms of overall impression, it would have been interesting to have a clearer idea about where the book sits in relation to the existing historiography of early British imperialism on the subcontinent. Most discussion of the wider literature occurs in a footnote on the opening page of the preface, and the book would have benefitted from expanding on this. Perhaps most importantly, Bryant's central argument rests on the overwhelming primacy of the commercial drive within the Company state, and this seems to challenge, or at least engage with, the recent work of Philip Stern which posits truly political motivations and activities on the part of Company servants. It seems to be a connection which merits deeper investigation.

Ultimately, though, Bryant reveals a dense wealth of knowledge about the Company's military operations in the 18th century, and asks important questions about the creation of the early colonial state. *The Emergence of British Power in India* is a refreshing addition to the historiography, and reminds us of the value of close, empirical analysis in historical research.

Notes

1. P. J. Stern, 'History and historiography of the English East India Company: past, present, and future!', *History Compass*, 7, 4 (2009), 1146–7. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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