

G.J. Bryant. *The Emergence of British Power in India, 1600-1784: A Grand Strategic Interpretation*. Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2013. 372 pp. ISBN: 9781843838548. \$99.00.

Wishing to fill an apparent gap in the political and military history of India, Bryant commences his analysis by noting that few British historians of India have touched the topic of his book for fear of being charged as an orientalist, triumphalist, militarist, determinist or all four in their work (ix). Eschewing the purportedly “generalist” purview of the social sciences, Bryant prefers to trace the emergence of British power through a handful of East India Company leaders and show how its rise was a reaction to French activities in Austria and India rather than any “latent imperialism” (166). The author occasionally hints that by “grand strategy” he may actually mean “imperialism” (268), though it is more like he is trying to erase the concept, its connotations of intentionality and any form of elite class consciousness altogether.

In order to prove the claim that British power lacked any “grand strategy” and was a reaction to “un-enterprising French” activities (83), Bryant masterfully deploys a large volume of archival data and public discourse to establish that the Company viewed its trading activities in India without moral sentiments (26). Bryant explains that the Company “allowed” its servants to amass a fortune privately as a “reasonable compensation for poor pay and years of exile” (171), “making easy money” (250) or “making a modest fortune over a number of years through private trade and reasonable parks for contracting military services” (182), taking what they wanted “on the side” (171) and enjoying profits from the arms trade (19). He also shows how the Company often postured to appease anti-war sentiment in London but, on the ground in India, did whatever it took (including the necessary “downside” of war [29]) to retain their perceived “ancient right” (122) to trade free of duty anywhere in India.

Covering a time period in which correspondences between India and London could take one year and writing through the point of view of the Company’s servants, Bryant successfully makes the reader feel a part of the action: phrases like “come up to Murshidabad” (138), “out to India” (209), “come out to Bengal” (183) or “up to Calcutta” (203), as well as using the old Company terms for places on his maps and even referring to the “jungles” of the Carnatic (49 and 65) help produce this effect. However, differentiating between the author’s “voice” and that of the Company which he wants to represent is not always easy. This is particularly troubling when appraising the use of the different terms for Indians and Company servants throughout the book: Muslim and Hindu leaders are referred to as an “aggressive predatory power”<sup>1</sup>, “itinerant mercenary Indian warriors” (46), “mercenary indigenous horse” (45), “bandits ... disaffected locals” (49), Nawab as a “bad debtor” (66), “mercenary Maratha horse” (80), “mercenary Indian (sepoy) infantry” (80), “ruthless” (142), “hoard of pillagers” (116), “enemy” (65, 128, 262 and 263), “rebellious rajas ... unpaid horde ... brutal son (of the Nawab)” (155), “Muslim mercenary” (158), “habitual jackal” (268), “hostile Maratha horse” (274), “Afghan threat” (235), “Muslim mercenary soldiers” (158), “horse” (207), “Maratha menace” (200 and 208), “ragtag motley mercenary troops” (219), “pernicious band of enemy horse” (275), “hoard” (290), “mercenary irregular Pindari horse” (290), “enemy cavalry” (290), “mercenary cavalry ... preventing revenue collection” (279) and the Raja of Tanjore, who the Company plundered, was as “... devious as any Indian Prince” (192). Siraj ud-Duala, the Nawab of Bengal (the most lucrative locale for the Company), is characterized as “cruel,

<sup>1</sup> There is a section in the middle of the book that lacks page numbers between pp. 143-153.

licentious, avaricious and intemperate” (110), “paranoid” and even “manic depressive” (134).<sup>2</sup> Like the voice of the Company, the portrayal of the ruthless Indians hiding amidst their jungles reminds me of the tiger in Kipling’s infamous story that gets reproduced in the public discourse, time and time again, on India from the “western” perspective and yet, unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century Kipling, Bryant’s book hails from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Likewise, Bryant holds Company servants in esteem, except for a few who he found incompetent for bungling the Company’s business goals. Bryant’s appreciation for Robert Clive, who established the groundwork for what was later to become the British Raj, is a prevalent theme. Bryant, who characterizes Clive as “magnanimous”, a man of “initiative and strategic understanding” (55), with good foresight and incredible “moral courage” (142) who planned to consolidate Company power and “stabilize the country” (155), represents India an opportunity for Clive to distinguish himself (74). To achieve this goal, Clive needed—as Bryant shows—to lie, commit fraud, manipulate, expand the military, develop more effective revenue collecting techniques/pacification methods and expand trade *sans* moral sentiment. In spite of these tendencies, Bryant inexplicably does not impose any derogatory psychiatric labels on Clive as he does on the Nawab of Bengal.

The most salient omission, presumably in the name of retaining the Company “voice”, is that Bryant does not even hint at the implications for the Indian people of the array of “pacification” missions and methods (230) or the “heinous” revenue raising methods that the Company used to maintain “peace” and support its business interests (27). The destruction of 1,000 villages is relegated to a footnote while Bryant takes pains, a number of times, to reproduce Company causality and illness statistics during its many contrived wars to retain its assumed right to do business as it wished. Even the battlefield death of leaders like Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, who refused to trade as the Company dictated or be a puppet leader, is relegated to a mere footnote (314).

Bryant’s analysis is potent evidence that colonial sentiments are still alive and well in some scholarly circles. For this reader, the book provides an important historical backdrop to understand the recent intensification of post-colonial wars led by the West and dominated by the Company’s same inexplicable sense of “right” to pursue capital at any cost without any moral sentiments.

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Alicia Schrikker and Jeroen Touwen, eds. *Promises and Predicaments: Trade and Entrepreneurship in Colonial and Independent Indonesia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2015. 334 pp. ISBN: 9789971698515. \$42.00.

This collection of essays, inspired by the work of Thomas Lindblad who researched economic connections from colonial to post-colonial Indonesia, is organized around three themes: trade, investment, entrepreneurship and changing regimes. The editors stress the importance of

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<sup>2</sup> It is shocking that Bryant would use the term “paranoid” given the constituent proof that he provides that the Company’s servants were untrustworthy and, for the majority of the time, trying to undermine the independent status of Muslim Nawabs and Hindu kings (whom he diminutively refers to as princes).