CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAR IN THE CARNATIC

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India ranked third (after Europe and the Western Hemisphere) in the grand strategic priorities of the French and British governments in the Seven Years’ War. Consequently, it was given less attention and fewer resources than the other war theatres. Unlike North America and the West Indies, India was not seen as a subject for conquest and settlement, rather as an area for commercial investment; and, even in this respect, it was not nearly as important as Europe and the Western Hemisphere (in 1752–4 English trade with Europe, in terms of value, accounted for 63% of total exports and 46% of total imports; the Western Hemisphere 30% and 40%; and the Orient 6% and 13% respectively). From their penetration of the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the sixteenth century, first the pioneering Portuguese, then the Dutch, English and French had competed, mostly peacefully, for the domination of the Indo-European trade. By the early eighteenth century, Portuguese power and enterprise was moribund and the Dutch had largely retreated to the East Indies, leaving Britain and France as the main European commercial rivals in India, with the English

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1 The Seven Years’ War in India is notable for the lack of modern scholarship relating to its course and interpretation. For details one has to fall back on accounts dating back from before the end of the Raj in 1947. From the contemporary period there were contributions from participants, somewhat self-serving on the French side. Robert Orme, a Madras civil servant who returned to Britain shortly before the siege in 1758, in subsequent years amassed a large quantity of records and personal responses from former colleagues to produce his judicious History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan, 4th ed., 3 vols. (London: Printed for F. Wingrave, 1803). Cambridge published an edited version of General Stringer Lawrence’s journals in 1761, An Account of the War in India between the English and the French on the Coast of Coromandel from 1750 to 1760 (London: printed for T. Jefferys, 1761). The French continued their squabbles back in France: Thomas-Arthur, comte de Lally, Mémoirs (Paris: De l'imprimerie de Guillaume Desprez, 1766), and Mémoire pour Bussy au sujet du mémoire que Lally vient de répandre dans le public (Paris: M. Lambert, 1766).


East India Company, by virtue of its more dynamic approach and its superior capitalization, ahead of the French (French trade in the East was worth only a quarter that of the British and their shipping and military costs were proportionately much higher). ⁴

Since, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as the British and French governments during the War of the Spanish Succession did not manifest any significant strategic interest in India, they allowed their respective East India companies, for mutual financial benefit to designate India as a neutral zone. This was not repeated during the War of the Austrian Succession or Seven Years' wars in the mid century, which suggests that a more militant and confident mercantilism had developed between the European antagonists engaged in the so-called “Second Hundred Years’ War”. ⁵ It also indicates that the British and French governments now had a conception of their power having an integrated global reality extending to worldwide trade as well as overseas settlements and naval bases. So, to attack their opponent in places where it was weakest was to weaken it as a whole – this seems to have been in the minds of both Pitt and Choiseul during the Seven Years’ War. Gains in one theatre could be offset against losses in others in any peace negotiations – not necessarily a welcome development for the East India companies if their interests were sacrificed to satisfy more important national needs elsewhere.

The Seven Years’ War in India, particularly in the south eastern province of the Carnatic, was really only the final phase of a much more protracted Franco-British armed struggle among the Europeans for pre-eminence there. It started in 1746 as an oriental extension of the War of the Austrian Succession. When peace was restored in Europe in 1748 and, supposedly, in India on the basis of the status quo ante, the French and British companies went on fighting a proxy war against each other by acting as auxiliaries in a struggle between local Indian princes for control of the Carnatic and the Deccan. Constitutionally and politically, the two provinces were linked since the Subadar (Imperial Viceroy) of the Deccan had authority over the Nawabs (Deputy Governors) of Arcot, the seat of government in the Carnatic. The outbreak of war in Europe again, in 1756, allowed the French and British once more to confront each other directly in India by attacking each other's Indian Ocean trade and principal settlements in the

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