Bengal had been a strategic backwater during the previous Anglo-French war in India (1744–48) because the local Mughal nawab (governor), Alivardi Khan, unlike his colleague in the Carnatic, had been strong enough to enforce neutrality on both sides in his dominions. Following the end of the war in 1748, when the respective royal forces had returned to Europe from the Carnatic, the French and British East India trading companies had continued their struggle for political dominance in the province by engaging as mercenaries on opposite sides in the struggle between rival Indian protagonists to become the local nawab. By the time the Seven Years’ War broke out, the British protégé (Muhammad Ali Khan) had won, gaining them a shaky pre-eminence there and financial support for the growing army controlled by the Company at their fortified coastal base of Madras. But French forces, led with remarkable political and military skill by the Marquis de Bussy, had balanced this by successfully sponsoring a claimant (Salabat Jang) to the superior Mughal post of Subadar (Viceroy) of the Deccan adjoining the Carnatic to the north, securing for his company revenue collecting rights on some coastal districts in the Northern Circars that could be valuable in financing future operations in the new looming war. The only drawback for the French was that the British sphere of influence in the Carnatic encompassed their capital, the fortified coastal settlement of Pondicherry, while this new source of power and money at Aurangabad in the Deccan, lay 800 miles to the north and

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1 The reading recommendations for the chapter on the Seven Years’ War in the Carnatic will also serve for this chapter. Two additions might be made, specific to Bengal: firstly, the estimable collection of primary documents from British, French and Indian sources contained in the three volume work edited by S C Hill, *Indian Records Series: Bengal 1756–1757* (London: J. Murray, 1905); and secondly, P M Marshall’s modern, balanced analysis of the general situation in Bengal in the later 18th Century (especially the Indian political, economic, political and anthropological context), contained in *The New Cambridge History of India: The British Bridgehead in Eastern India* (Cambridge, 1987).
400 miles inland where naval support could not be effective and Bussy had to remain with his force to maintain the connection.2

In 1756, with Britain and France once again on opposite sides in a European war, everyone assumed that hostilities between them would again break out in the Indian Ocean where European naval power was unchallenged and where there were considerable opportunities for commerce warfare. The conflict would also probably again be extended to the Indian mainland, regardless of any objections from the local Indian powers. And this time, it could well include Bengal for in that year the eighty-two year old Nawab, Alivardi Khan, had died, but not before appointing as his successor, his grandson, Siraj-ud-daulah, a debauched, irresolute and allegedly cowardly young man of twenty-four who had neither the political nor military skills to deal with the challenges that would immediately confront him.3 These included family members and powerful local magnates who opposed his appointment. And he might also feel impelled, like his grandfather in the last European war, to try to prevent the British and French East India trading companies from fighting each other in his province as they had, and would again this time, in the Carnatic. Alivardi Khan had been alarmed after 1748 at the way his brother Mughal governors in the south had become reliant upon European military power to support their positions and ambitions. He had advised his grandson, when he became Nawab of Bengal, to keep a tight grip on the pretensions and actions of the European companies for fear of a similar fate overtaking him.4 It was good advice; unfortunately, the way Siraj-ud-daulah went about it precipitated the outcome it was intended to avoid – an even more rapid and complete assumption of power by the English East India Company in Bengal than in the Carnatic. And, along the way, the French were eliminated from playing any further part in Bengali politics and, eventually, in Indian politics as a whole as the

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2 Salbat Jang had told Bussy: “You know that the state of my affairs necessarily requires the support of a European power; on this condition I am able to govern; either you must remain here, or I must enlist the English in my interest.” G B Malleson, A History of the French in India, from the Founding of Pondicherry in 1674 to the Capture of that Place in 1761, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1900), 479.

3 A contemporary Indian writer said of Siraj-ud-daulah: His “head was so much disordered by the fumes of pride and ignorance as to commit an infinity of errors....” Syed Gholam Hossein Khan, Seir Mutaqherim, 4 vols. (Calcutta, 1902), 2: 188.

4 Dr. Forth (at Chinsura, the Dutch factory, a mile from Chandanagore) to Roger Drake (Governor, Fort William, Calcutta), 16 Dec, 1756, in Indian Records Series: Bengal in 1756–1757, ed. Samuel Charles Hill, 3 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1905), 2: 64–67.