

Book Reviews

The Merchant and the State: The French in India, 1666-1739 (2 Vols.) by Aniruddha Ray, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2004, Rs.1800

The book *The Merchant and the State: The French in India, 1666-1739*, written by Professor Aniruddha Ray, and is presently under review, is fairly entitled to a claim of *stupendous* scholarship; and on that ground it can be treated as the best research output of modern Indian history published in the year 2004. Ray has descended from a lineage of historical scholarship which was once patriarched by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Professor HC Roy Choudhury, Professor SN Sen, Professor DC Sarkar, Dr Nalini Kanta Bhattasali etc. among others, who used to profess a theological commitment to personal engagement with the sources in their entirety and to develop a strong story line in their narrational mediation with the past. Ray's *The Merchant and the State* appears to be an enterprise in the act of retribution of the scholarly tradition which has been seriously threatened, at a point of time, by the appropriation of historicism. By his translation of *Francois Martin: Memories* he has reiterated a statement, composed and uttered and re-uttered, by Wilson, Pargiter, Woodroff, Beverege, Raverty, Sarkar, Dey, Aga Mehdi Hussan etc., that Clio exacts a severe price from the faithful to the *raison d'être* in terms of the dialogical competence commanded for the negotiation. The present publication of Ray is a judicious articulation of the seriousness of the enterprise.

The story of the French in India was an untold one; perhaps history might not

be remembering those who were defeated. The entire range of scholarly engagement with the colonial India was dominated, for a good part of the past century, by the British activities. The whole SOAS enterprise was focused on the arguments of validity and legitimation of the British colonialism. Barring Dodwell's *Dupleix and Clive* and the initial inducement which SP Sen could have engendered for his *French in India*, nothing that needs to be of any worth could claim the SOAS sponsorship. So was the indifference in the conduct of the *Ecole Pratique d'Extreme Orient*, which had espoused research on French colonies in the South East Asia than on the French erstwhile in India; presumably, they might not have had any good argument to relate the story of a lost cause. With this state of research on the French in India being foregrounded, Ray's curatorial mobilization of the entire arsenal of the French Archives had awakened the dormant historical curiosities. Ray had left no stone unturned; his peregrination in the Archives Nationales et Coloniales, Archives des Affaires Etrangeres, Archives des Services de l'Armee Historique in as much as in the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer at Aix-en-Provence and the Bibliotheque Nationale fortified him with a wealth of information, some requisite properties that served to validate the position which Ray had taken to conceive the narrative.

The first part of the title of the book viz. *The Merchant and the State* tends to suggest a thematique and thesis overlapping negotiation at a theoretical plane; but Ray has proposed to develop, without relapsing into a typology of

conducted historicistic engagement, a story ably mediated by chronology, and in the ensemble of a number of subtexts to serve his narrational purposes. It is a historiography of sorts whose epistemology is asserted by the plausibility of the story told than the metaphysics of a foisted thesis and its refutation or validation. Ray's subtexts read like several acts of a drama such as Formation of the Company, Early Years, Problems of Survival, New Beginnings, Stagnation, Road to Expansion, Transformation, Denouement and a few others. The first volume of *The Merchant and the State* is designed to furnish the genesis and the systemic crisis leading to the liquidation of the first Company set up in February 1664. From 1664 to 1719, the French East India Company, as Ray claims, succeeded to establish operationally effective factories at Surat, Masulipatnam, Pondicherry, Bijapur, Tanjore, Kaveripatnam and Bengal. For the Surat trade the first *farman* was secured by Babber in 1666 from the Mughal Emperor and subsequently, Caron, the French Factor sought to renew it on the same terms as the old one. The Masulipatnam factory was set up a little earlier, and, almost simultaneously, the French came to Bengal. Initially the French did not secure any *farman* for the Masulipatnam factory but later, in 1669, Marcara secured a *farman*, and the first French ship appeared in Bengal in 1673. Duplessis is being held, on reasonable grounds, to have acquired a land at Chandannagar in 1673, purchased land at Dhaka in 1674-75 and possibly to have secured *parwana* from Shaista Khan, the Subedar of Bengal. By 1650, the French secured a foot-hold at Pondicherry, a treaty for

San Thome in 1674, a political mileage in Golconda in 1775, permission to set up a lodge at Kaveripatnam in 1688, so on and so forth, not, in fact, all of them equally useful for the business activities of the French East India Company are important commercial strides.

For certain reason or the other, sometimes the European wars, often the competition of the English and Dutch in India and partly due to dissensions amongst the functionaries, the French Company did not turn out to be an enterprising profit-making venture. Ray has described it very perceptibly. 'The Assembly authorized the Directors to take necessary loan that could go upto 2½ million for buying cargo. The cargo went up to 2,190,290 Livres, of which 5,51,000 in goods, while 6,50,000 Livres were spent in the purchase of the ship and equipment. *Maurepas* and *Toison* were destined for Bengal with cargo worth 9,00,000 Livres while *Flerissant* and *Aurore* were destined for Surat with cargo worth 1,290,000 Livres. They left on 7 April 1699. Undoubtedly this was the most valued cargo ever sent by the Company to India. The total expenses in 1698, including the salaries of the employees, debts and interests in India as well as the charging of the four ships came to 1,439,986 Livres 18 Sols 3 Dinners, which were general expenses. The purchase of bullion and money in Spain and goods in France in 1698 were 1,300,000 Livres and in 1699, 2,190,000 Livres. The Company therefore would need enormous profit to tide over this kind of expenses, including debts to be paid in France'. (Vol. I, p. 342) At another point of his study, Ray has tried to calculate the loss suffered by the Company at different centres by 1709. 'While Pondicherry was lingering almost without commerce,' wrote Ray, 'the debts in India were rising steadily. The highest was at Surat (11,00,000 Livres), followed by Pondicherry (4,50,000 Livres) and Bengal (3,00,000 Livres)'. (Vol. I, p. 455) It would be doing well if Ray could have

given his readers some tenable economic explanations for the growth of the economic plight in which the company has eventually submerged. One of the explanations may be secured from the structure of commodity which the Company intended to export to India, or in other words the business policy of the company. It had been at a point and with reference to the Bengal trade that emphasis was laid to acquire Bengal silk and some textile, for the export trade. During the same period under consideration, the English East India Company had overwhelmingly shifted its policy from the export of spices to the export of textile and silk, and secondly to make larger investments in Bengal than in Bombay, Surat and Madras. An import commodity analysis of the French East India Company would substantially account for the misunderstanding of the nature of the Indian demand market and the analysis brought to it, which was needed to exploit the Indian consumer market. The subsequent success in the silk trade which was effected by the new Company that came into existence in 1719 suggests a serious policy shift in consideration of the Indian market behaviour. It is not clear from the study why the French East India Company could not take advantage of the factor of severe silver shortage in India, which led to the appreciation of the silver price enormously *vis-à-vis* gold? Export of bullion, instead of commodity from France, would have altered the business scenario, the kind of activity in which the English East India Company had fruitfully engaged itself.

After the new Company was set up in 1719, some radical changes in the business policy and in the business management of the Company are noticed. From the account of Ray, it appears that between 1719-1732 the export policy of the new Company was tentative, indulging in unassorted commodities from saltpeter to rice to pepper to *cauri* to silk and textile, than it was founded on a judicious selection of

commodities and to draw a planned investment policy on those export objects. However, unlike the earlier Company the new Company appeared to have realized the significance of the silver bullion import trade. Casual reference to bullion import by the functionaries would suggest that certain shifts in policy were taking place. One of the points which posits a little difficulty in making a correct statistical appraisal of the financial situation is the use of different denominations of coins *viz.* Livre, Pagodas, Rupee Ecus etc. without any suggestion of their conversion rate in the trade transactions in different French trade centers in India, though the author has given a conversion table in Appendix 17.

An important aspect of the study under review is the details which have been brought to bear on the narrative of the French endeavour in India. Ray has thoughtfully discussed the requisite administrative changes in Pondicherry, Chandannagar, Surat, Mahe and Karikkal. He fascinatingly explores the internal political dynamics which has alerted the French factors to draw appropriate strategies to negotiate with the complex Indian situation. The decline of the central administration and the rise of the local chieftains, Maratha, Mysore, Hyderabad, Arcot, all struggling with each other for extended political spaces, have furnished an opportunity to the foreign merchants to fish in the troubled waters. The other element in Ray's study is the financial position of the different factories. While discussing Surat he mentions, 'The French were able to improve their position at Surat compared to the situation prevailing in 1719 when the debt at Surat stood at Rs. 9 million by the accumulation of interest of 9 per cent interest per year. As seen, the French began to pay the debt on the formula of simple 5 per cent interest on the capital. By 1739, the debt stood at Rs. 1,126,486. The payment of the debt continued and by October 1755, the Company had paid Rs. 7,74,670. But by then interest had

accumulated on the rest to take the debt in 1756 to Rs. 1,50,710.' (Vol. II, p.750) I am a little intrigued by the above piece of information in two ways. If the debt was initially contracted on 9 per cent rate of interest, how could the French Company arbitrarily reduce the rate of interest to 5 per cent on the capital? Secondly, if the debt in 1719 amounted to nine million rupees and the company did have paid Rs. 7,74,670 up to 1755 how was it that the balance left in 1756 amounted to Rs. 1,50,710?

Ray has done a wonderful job to explore the position of French trade in Bengal after Dupleix assumed the charge of Chandannagar. Ray wrote, 'Dupleix took the credit for him in the matter of commerce of the Company. Bengal had received Rs.1,800,000 and some effects. They collected very rich cargo of more than Rs. 2,200,000 that included the expenses... Two ships had left and two more would follow soon with cargo. In this, there was much of garras as asked by the Company. Bengal had contracted for the supply of 50,000 pieces, of which 250 bales were sent by the first ship... This year much more silk was purchased. They would have one thousand mds. of silk.' (Vol. II, p. 848) While the above mentioned trade figures suggest that a radical shift in the Company's import policy had taken place with noticeable emphasis being laid on textile and silk, the other important feature was the import of silver bullion. Pondicherry promising to send 74,000 march of silver bullion to Chandannagar signified a quantum jump in the import of silver. The emphasis laid on silk is instanced by the piece of information that 'they should have 62 million of tani silk each year. There should also be garras and other goods, including different types of silk.

The chapter entitled 'Dupleix in Bengal: The Last Flicker' is particularly interesting. It has not only summed up the activities of Dupleix in Bengal for the expansion of French trade lights have been thrown in the course of the

discussion, on a number of issues which were not detailed out previously with so much clarity and definiteness, as Ray did. The expansion of French trade at Qasimbazar and Patna and the nature of transactions that took place have been treated, in fact, with some very new pieces of information. Haji Ahmad's engagement in saltpetre trade tends to explain his involvement in Bengal politics during the subedarship of his brother Ali Vardi Khan. The other important feature of this chapter is the presentation of data regarding Dupleix's private trade in Bengal. It is true that a remarkable change had taken place not only in the quantity of trade but also in the nature of specialization which the condition of Bengal at that time had suggested. The role of the House of the Jagat Seths in the money market and banking in Bengal has been amply clarified by Ray with a host of new information that he could fruitfully secure from the French archives. It is interesting that the intimacy that gradually developed between the French and the Jagat Seths was totally different during the time of Dupleix; perhaps Fate Chand's interference in the circulation of Arcot rupee in Bengal causing shortage of money for the French trade was one of the reasons for the French circumspection. Significantly enough, Dupleix happened to be the first foreign trader who was contemplating to exploit the Tibetan trade through Nepal, or through the Assam region, which was tried by Warren Hastings later when he sent Bogle to Bhutan on his way to Tibet in 1775. The complexity of the money market in Bengal in the early eighteenth century could be realized from the fact that a *batta* of 10 per cent was demanded against the use of Arcot rupee and when Fate Chand had relented to allow Arcot rupee he had suggested imposition of 8 per cent *batta* in addition to the payment of tax to the tune of 3½ per cent for Arcot rupee. It is true the Princep Committee report during the time of Cornwallis had dealt with some of the

issues, but Ray has furnished some information which were perhaps overlooked by the Commission.

Ray has very significant data on export of gold and silver bullion to India and the profit earned by the Company from the Indian trade for a period commencing on 1725-26 to 1739-40 in the Appendix 18. From an export of bullion worth 4,475,000 Livres in 1727-28, the amount had quantitatively jumped to 2.5 times within a decade amounting to 11,244,168 in the year 1738-39. But a little difference is noticed in the corresponding sale and purchase figures during the same decade starting off with purchase worth 2,413,459 Livres and sale worth 4,532,304 Livres in the year 1725-26 and coming to purchase worth 7,748,890 Livres and sale 14,692,744 Livres suggesting approximately 3 per cent escalation in the business in the year 1738-39. Besides, the role of Bengal in the French trade during the period under study demands a separate account sheet. The business account furnished by Ray competes admirably with the total quantum of business of the English East India Company during the same period. In one of the studies seeking to calculate the total tonnage of silk production in Bengal during the early 18th century we have tentatively arrived at a figure of four thousand tons being equally shared by the domestic and the export markets. But Ray's information that Dupleix had placed order for one thousand mds. of silk annually would compel us to revise our decision in favour of higher production figures.

In the last chapter entitled *Denouement*, Ray has not only had a summation of the economic enterprises of the French, but also the politics and sociology of the diasporic community. It is indeed a very significant piece of information that though the Indian French claimed to fence themselves as a nation, the Mughal emperors did not treat them as anything more than traders. Ray has explored some of the reasons

for the failure of French during the period 1666 to 1719 and the nature of policy changes which had stimulated the growth of the French trade in India in the subsequent decades. The decline of the Mughals certainly does not serve to explain the rise of the French; it is not even contingent, because there is no instance by which it could be convincingly argued that the Mughals had treated the French with any political apathy. What has happened was confined to the French engagement with the local authorities and the story is repetitive with reference to their archrivals, the British too. Ray attributes the success of the new Company to the system introduced by Jean Law; the official recognition of private trade of the employees in the year 1725 is also held by Ray as a mechanic to keep the Indo-European run for the Company through the coastal trade. While the author has developed a line of argument to explain the sources for the French accumulation of silver the more meaningful hints have been thrown about the frequency-distribution of the French trade till 1755. Ray wrote, 'Haudrere estimated that an average five million Livres were sent per year, often in bullion, to Asia between 1719 and 1730. The dispatch began to increase after 1730 and reached ten million Livres in 1740, after which it began to diminish for sometime. Between 1750 and 1755, it reached the highest peak of thirteen million Livres. Haudrere estimated that the French dispatch was one third of that of the English East India Company earlier but both became almost equal between 1735 and 1740. After 1755, the French dispatch began to fall in comparison to that of the English. While China absorbed 15% to 30% of the bullion, India took between 60% to 80%, leaving the rest for others.' I do not know how the statement can be reconciled with the figures given in Appendix 18 and drawn from Haudrere's *La Compagnie*, IV. 1196-99. Haudrere states that bullion import in India went up to 11.244 million in

1738-39 which is certainly more than the figure of ten million stated to have been imported in Asia in 1740. Presumably, if the figures mentioned in the Appendix 18 regarding purchase in India during the same finance year is correct, there is probably any Livre left for the Chinese investment, far less investing to the tune of 15 per cent to 30 per cent of the total Asian import of the bullion. And correspondingly if the figures quoted in the Appendix 18 with regard to import of bullion in India is held to be correct there must be some serious mistake in the calculation of total bullion import in Asia, as mentioned in the above statement. However, these minor discrepancies in statistical figures do not seriously undermine the importance of the study, nor does it invalidate other trade figures which may be fruitfully used for the construction of a reliable history of the French trade in India within the framework of a refined quantitative analysis. While there was a lacuna in the analysis of the French import in India during 1666 to 1719, as we have already mentioned, Ray took good care to draw the inventory of French imports in India in the subsequent period. He mentions wine from Bordeaux, Brandy (called *eau-de-vie* by the French). Madeira wine, wheat and even salted meat. Drapes, coral, woolen cloth and gold yarn were also imported regularly for sale in the Indian market for the consumption either of the European settlement in India, or for the upper echelon of the Indian society. It is indeed interesting to know that while emphasis was laid on pepper as an export commodity, the importance of cotton yarn and silk was not equally felt. One of the reasons visualized by Ray was the prohibitive custom restriction. Saltpetre appears to be an important import commodity and the total investment varied between 1,00,000 to 3,000,000 Livres, so also was the importance of *cauris* in which the investment had gone up to 3,00,000 Livres. What is significant is the conclusion of Haudrere's that

though there was profit all along in the eighteenth century but it was less than 5 per cent. Finally, on the basis of twenty appendices the author has not only qualified his position on the centrality of his arguments, but has also enabled the readers to get a glimpse of the kind of political transactions that took place between the Company officials and the Mughal government and the local authorities.

In the final analysis *The Merchant and the State: The French in India (1666-1739)* deserves to be treated as a very significant contribution in the contemporary colonial debate in India. In spite of the fact that the enormous quantity of archival information that Ray has augmented would overwhelm a reader of the book, the author has very considerately steered him/her through a narrative that has always been informed without being overbearing at any point.

Tapas K. Roy Choudhury
Fellow, IIAS, Shimla

Women and the Politics of Class, by Johanna Brenner, Aakar Books, New Delhi, 2006 (in agreement with Monthly Press Review, New York, 2000), pp. 330, Rs. 750/-

Feminists broadly agree that women are generally dominated and oppressed, and also agree on what such oppression consists of, but they disagree on how they explain the oppression, opined Caroline Ramazanoglu once, thus opening up the debate on direction, explanation and identification of issues pertaining to feminism. Feminism as a social theory has faced many divisions and dissensions, right from the issue of definition to the resolution of impasses created by ideology, institutionalization of feminism and its branching off in many a direction. Interestingly, the feminist thought itself questions the efficacy of believing the feminist thought/theory at all. And yet, the contenders agree that any effective