

## INTRODUCTION

### Les grandes Indes

In a *mémoire* dated December 1776, written during the journey from Agra to Hyderabad, Louis Laurent de Féderbe, comte de Modave, with remarkable prescience, foretold British dominance of the geographical area the French then called *les grandes Indes*:

Une réflexion très simple n'échappera pas aux esprits bien faits, c'est que les Anglais, aujourd'hui seuls sur ce grand théâtre, se préparent dans le secret et le silence à étendre sans mesure le rôle important qu'ils y jouent depuis que nous ne sommes plus rien.

(A very simple thought will not escape all right-thinking minds: the English are today alone on the large stage of India, secretly and silently preparing to extend immeasurably their already major role, a role which they have had since we became nothing there.)<sup>1</sup>

His observation that the French had 'become nothing' in India was something of an exaggeration, calculated to support his contention that France should once more intervene in Indian affairs in order to prevent the expansionism of the British East India Company. But the stark opposition which he established between British power and that of the French contained an element of truth. Following the Treaty of Paris of 1763, the French presence in India had been reduced to a rump of five *comptoirs* or trading posts, Pondichéry, Karikal, Mahé, Yanaon and Chandernagor, scattered around the edges of the subcontinent. In accordance with the treaty, Louis XV agreed to renounce any further expansionist activities and to maintain the *comptoirs* without fortifications or a standing army.<sup>2</sup> After 1763, France had become a peripheral power in India, standing, as Modave's theatrical metaphor might have put it, in the wings while the British occupied centre stage.<sup>3</sup>

If French personnel in India believed that they had been marginalized, then the history of the French encounter with India has been similarly consigned to the peripheries in recent historiography of both the French and the British empires. In the historiography of French imperialism, where interest in the 'sec-

ond French empire' established under the Third Republic has predominated,<sup>4</sup> the history of the French in India has largely been confined to military accounts, trade histories of the French East India Company, biographies of individuals responsible for creating the *comptoirs* and detailed micro-histories of the *comptoirs* themselves.<sup>5</sup> Although French literary and cultural criticism has adopted a more comparative approach than is typically the case with imperial historiography, acknowledging British dominance on the subcontinent after the 1763 Treaty of Paris, such criticism tends to elide the implications of France's subordinate colonial status for the techniques of representation used in French-language texts on India.<sup>6</sup>

The role of India in Britain's empire, conversely, has generated an extensive and varied mass of scholarship. Administrative, political and military histories have been complemented by work on the cultural relationship between India and Britain. The intersecting relationships between imperialism, Romanticism and Orientalism in Britain between 1780 and 1850 have in recent years provided theoretical frameworks for scholars researching British cultural production.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless – and as some literary critics and historians concede – before the sultans of Mysore were defeated in 1799, the establishment of British rule over India was neither inevitable nor unchallenged.<sup>8</sup> Not all French parties with material interests in India accepted the Treaty of Paris as irreversible; nor did the British see their dominance on the subcontinent as inevitable, as illustrated by Richard Wellesley's belligerence towards French personnel in India.<sup>9</sup> India continued to play a significant role in French cultural production and political thought, a role that transcended the vicissitudes of power relations and material fortunes on the subcontinent between 1754 and 1815.

Eschewing traditional periodization, which frequently divides French history and literature according to regimes (the *ancien régime*, the period of the Revolution and First Empire, and the Restoration), this study aims to illuminate continuities in representational strategies and cultural preoccupations which have previously been neglected through infelicitous periodization. Adopting a diachronic approach, spanning sixty-one years, and combining it with synchronic analyses of specific events (such as Tipu Sultan's embassy to France in 1788 and the fall of Seringapatam in 1799), it will show how certain techniques of representation were common to literary and non-literary texts alike, and how the increase of British administrative power in India functioned, paradoxically, as a means of establishing notions of French colonial identity. The timeframe is determined by the fortunes of the French in India: in 1754 French influence was at its height (a fact acknowledged by hagiographical biographies of Joseph-François Dupleix which traditionally posit that his recall to France constituted the end of any French colonial expansionist activities on the subcontinent),<sup>10</sup> while at the end of the Napoleonic Wars the Treaty of Paris (1815) returned the

five *comptoirs* to French control according to the conditions of the settlement of 1763, confirming France's subordinate position.<sup>11</sup>

Investigating the history of India as a concept in French imaginations during a crucial period of colonization is, given the essentially nebulous subject of *mentalités* and collective attitudes, methodologically problematic. To analyse textual sources is to concentrate on the small minority which constituted the French reading public in this period. Any quantitative assessment of the influence of the ideas identified is therefore tentative. The study concedes, moreover, that it would be fallacious to posit a homogeneous French national identity during the eighteenth century. Michel Antoine has rightly warned researchers against extrapolating from localized findings to draw conclusions about public opinion under Louis XV on a national scale, emphasizing the Parisian intellectual domination of the printed word.<sup>12</sup> Although some recent works of French history hypothesize the existence of a French national consciousness from the Middle Ages onwards,<sup>13</sup> the contested meaning of the phrase 'la nation française' is a tenet of this monograph, which questions how changing boundaries of national identity fit into broader patterns of social, cultural and political change.

This work defines 'French' linguistically, considering documents written in French by French personnel based either in Europe or in the French colonies.<sup>14</sup> It analyses the sources not as simple portrayals or reflections of the world but primarily as *dynamic* representations. As Prendergast has argued, representations 'elicit, precisely by way of their fictional modes of representation, *attitudes* to the world that enable – or disable – forms of understanding'.<sup>15</sup> The study examines the growing importance of a textual India,<sup>16</sup> revealing how narratives and strategies of representation circulated between genres and discourses, between the fictional and the factual. Paying careful attention to literary convention, political language, vocabulary shifts, the circumstances of composition and the social and institutional status of individual authors, it will demonstrate the evolution and longevity of certain ideas about India while relating such notions to the contingencies of France's position in Europe and the world.

Since the work of Said, it has become an *idée reçue* in cultural criticism to argue that French literary writing on India during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was dominated by the notion of India as a site of the imagination. Unconstrained as they were by the realities of colonial rule, French writers, unlike their British counterparts, 'ruminated about places that were principally *in their minds* [italics in the original]'.<sup>17</sup> As the analysis will demonstrate, however, the exploitation of an imaginary India was not confined to fictional discourses. *Philosophes* such as Diderot speculated that France had the potential to liberate India from the despotic British; French representatives in the *comptoirs* took the hypothesis further, arguing that it should provide a basis for French colonial policy. In his report of April 1814 to the government in Paris

concerning the state of the French trading posts in India, the comte du Blanc pressed for the restoration of French trading rights in India, justifying his argument with the curious observation that the French were regarded in India much more highly than were the British:

En réclamant nos droits primitifs, incontestables ainsi que le doit d'une grande nation, comme la notre, nous serions réintégrés. Je regarde ce point d'autant plus essentiel que sans cesse notre ennemi jaloux, cherche à empiéter et à proscrire, le nom Français beaucoup plus aimé que le leur.

(In claiming back our original incontestable rights, as well as the rights of a great nation, as is ours, we would be restored. I see this point as even more essential in that our jealous enemy unceasingly seeks to grind down and restrict the French name, which is much more loved than theirs.)<sup>18</sup>

### L'Inde perdue

This monograph could be accused of adopting what Mary Louise Pratt has called a 'European "planetary consciousness"'.<sup>19</sup> The suggestion that India functioned as a space for competing discourses or even a clash of civilizations (the British and the French) might be seen to perpetuate that colonial discourse, identified by Said, which ignores the agency of Indians themselves in writing their own history. Yet to shy away from the existence of global competition between the European powers would be to neglect a vital component of the power relations which allowed colonial discourses to develop. The encounter between France and India in the eighteenth century was shaped by France's relationship with Britain. As Voltaire somewhat flippantly remarks in his *Fragments sur quelques révolutions dans l'Inde* (1773) on the War of Austrian Succession (1740–8): 'Dès que la rupture entre la France et l'Angleterre éclata, il fallut se battre dans l'Amérique et dans l'Inde, selon l'usage' (As soon as war broke out between France and England, it was necessary to fight in both America and India, as was the custom).<sup>20</sup>

India, like North America, was invariably conceived of as a strategic theatre in which European disputes could be played out and, while Austria was the detested 'natural enemy', Franco-British antagonism dominated the period recently dubbed the 'Second Hundred Years' War'.<sup>21</sup> Given the policy of *revanche* which motivated France's foreign policy between 1763 and 1783,<sup>22</sup> and increasing British dominance of Indian trade, India became as much a locus for exploring British alterity and assessing French national interests as it was for engaging with the inhabitants of the subcontinent.

India was thus part of a European narrative. Even as knowledge about the geography, religions (particularly Hinduism) and society of India was increasing, the loss of what was perceived as 'Dupleix's empire' was being deployed

for Gallo-centric ends. In literature, in philosophical tracts, and in letters and *mémoires* by French personnel in India, restored French rule was posited as an alternative to British despotism. By analysing these texts, it is possible to identify a counter-narrative to the model of French empire-building offered by historians of the 'second' French empire, as the *comptoirs* stimulated a continuity in French colonial thinking which undermines the historiographical division of the French imperial adventure into two discrete periods. The failure of French expansionism in India under Louis XV and Louis XVI – or *l'Inde perdue* (lost India), as the pro-colonial writer Claude Farrère dubbed it in 1935 – informed colonial thought under the Third Republic. For commentators based in the *métropole* in 1815, the French settlements were viewed as a *lieu de mémoire* of a counterfactual French rule in India.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the French loss of Saint-Domingue in 1804 was until recently 'occluded' from histories of the French Revolution, the French loss of India in the eighteenth century continued to have a presence, albeit at times a marginal one, in both histories and literature. In the case of Haiti, the overthrow of French imperial rule by a slave revolt was an embarrassment that lent itself to national amnesia; in the case of India, however, a colonial rival was involved and it was possible to interpret the loss as an intra-European affair.<sup>24</sup> The role that this loss played in the construction of a French colonial identity has not yet been fully explored. It is this lacuna which the present study seeks to address.

### Overview

Employing a comparative approach, and questioning the colonizer-versus-colonized binary which, despite attempts to revise it, persists in colonial discourse analysis, the present study posits a triangular discursive relationship between Britain, France and India.<sup>25</sup> It aims to challenge two assumptions. First, it questions recent theories about the generation of colonial discourses and the establishment and maintenance of power. Within French cultural production, the trope of India was employed not as a means of imposing and maintaining colonial power, but rhetorically to oppose another colonizer: France's European rival, Britain. Second, it demonstrates that, despite India's peripheral significance in terms of the French imperial and commercial system (to which the sugar-producing West Indies were far more important), the subcontinent had cultural ramifications for conceptions of 'Frenchness'. Accordingly, following an overview (Chapter 1) of the political, commercial and military relationship between France and India from the recall of Dupleix in 1754 to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the study is schematized to expose recurring themes and strategies of representation, moving from overtly aesthetic to ostensibly factual texts.

Chapter 2 begins with an exploration of the tropes which were used in both travelogues and fictional works as a means of establishing Indian alterity. The focus then turns to how this representation of Indian alterity was distinctly French, and how the rhetoric that accompanied it posited India as a site of British alterity – an alterity characterized chiefly by a despotism to which both the French and the Indians were subjected. Finally, the chapter reveals the impact of Tipu Sultan's embassy to Versailles in 1788, considering how the arrival of Indians on French soil influenced French perceptions of India.

Chapter 3 surveys a theme familiar in literary critiques: Indian cultural identity as 'feminine'.<sup>26</sup> After clarifying how the tropes of feminization and female stereotypes were used in travelogues, administrative reports and histories, the chapter investigates the role of the Indian woman in contemporaneous debates on female fashion and behaviour in both Britain and France, exploring the impact of gender-specific knowledge gained in India on perceptions of French culture and mores. The final section, considering how female writers dealt with Indian alterity, reveals the complexity of reactions stimulated by contact with the subcontinent.

Chapter 4 analyses another strategy of representation: mythmaking. First discussing how the European discovery of Hinduism in the late eighteenth century generated both serious scholarship and fictional interpretations, it goes on to consider India as a signifier in the French collective imagination of a lost empire after 1763, and the mythologizing of the careers of Dupleix and Lally for specific political ends: criticism of the policies of the *ancien régime*, vitriolic attacks on the British during the Napoleonic Wars, or promoting the republican ideal of the liberating French and a civic ideal of 'Frenchness'.

Chapter 5 explores the writing of Indian history. After examining how writers such as Voltaire represented and exploited the ancient history of India, it analyses those texts (discursive accounts and popular historical plays) that portrayed the sultans of Mysore and their eventual defeat by the British in 1799. The final section studies those alternative histories of the French in India which appeared after 1763 (and, indeed, continued into the twentieth century), speculating about what India could have become under French rule.

Chapter 6 considers overtly philosophical texts on India alongside commercial and political tracts that sought to define and categorize the subcontinent. Examining philosophical debates, it traces the evolution of India from a vague signifier of oriental despotism and superstition to a means of articulating the unease about colonial expansionism which became widespread during the last decade of monarchical rule. In addition, it analyses that which was distinctive in the French response to Britain's increasing administrative responsibility on the subcontinent.

This synthetic analysis, tracing the evolution of French ideas about India and the trajectories of the political and commercial relationships between the two countries, should not be seen as overstating the importance of India to France, either culturally or politically. It aims, rather, to reveal a hitherto-neglected narrative which, when read contrapuntally with the British story of India, demonstrates the importance of competing European colonialisms to the formation of French political and cultural identities.<sup>27</sup>

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