

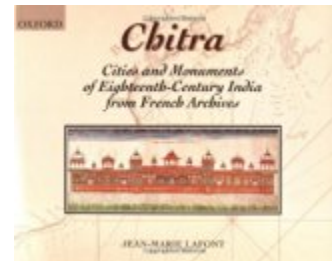
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Marie Lafont. *Chitra: Cities and Monuments of Eighteenth-Century India from French Archives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiv + 162 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-565731-9.

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In the recent past historians of South Asia have come to recognize the dynamic significance of the eighteenth century C.E. as part of the story of the modern transformations of the sub-continent. Where once both British and Indian historiography suggested that the coming of the English rule had swept aside a period, notable for its decline and decay, following upon the collapse of the previous great empire of the Mughals—a sort of required darkness before the dawn of new light from the West, today there is renewed interest in issues of cultural and economic exchanges, state-formation and urban growth. Dr. Jean-Marie Lafont of the Institut des Langues et Civilisations, Orientales, Paris, a scholar already known for his research on the French in India, particularly in relation to the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab, here presents his readers with an engaging contribution to the vision of Indian urban life in the revisited eighteenth century.

This book, beautifully printed and produced with the assistance of the Cultural section of the Embassy of France in India, is the latest in the series French Sources of Indian History. Its mission is to draw attention to the many maps and drawings housed in several archives in France that present new evidence of the cities and monuments of India, particularly in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Opening with an obligatory foreword by the then Ambassador of France in India, the book gives emphasis to “many new aspects of the exchanges that took place at multiple levels between France and India during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (p. 1). The book offers examples of what might be discovered in the Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer (CAOM), Archives de France in Aix-en-Provence, the source of the majority of the documents in the volume. Additional materials

are reproduced from the Jean-Baptiste Gentil Collection in the Departement des Estampes et de la Photographie of the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris and the Institut Geographique National, Paris.

Lafont addresses an audience of historians and cartographers interested in urban and military developments of the subcontinent as well as an Indian general reading public. He does not discuss explicitly how he chose the specific maps and plans that are included. They do include interior cities and forts that figured in eighteenth-century political or military affairs: Daulatabad, Trichinopoly, Srirangam, Tanjore, Ginji, Chinglepet, Kassimbazar, Faizabad, and Delhi. However, it is the coastal margins and the colonial ports of trade that are featured. Beginning with Surat and Bombay, the selection proceeds around the shores of the Arabian sea (Vijayadurg, Mangalore, Cochin, and the French enclave of Mahe on the Malabar coast), to the Bay of Bengal (Tranquebar, Negapatnam, Fort St. David, Pondicherry, Madras, Vizagapatnam, Calcutta, and Chandernagor). Whether because of Pondicherry’s significance as a French enclave, or the availability of attractive illustrations, that territory receives the greatest coverage with ten plates.

The quality of the reproductions of both maps, plans and illustrations is first-rate. Lafont provides a clear introduction to the sources and the creation of the various maps and documents the careers of the various artists and cartographers—many of them French military officers in service of Indian rulers—particularly Jean-Baptiste Gentil, who served in the Deccan and Awadh, collected Indo-Persian manuscripts and paintings and wrote a sig-

nificant memoir on the territories of the Mughal empire. The career of Louis-Francois-Gregoire Lafitte de Brassier, a talented cartographer is documented with nine maps in the selected plates.

Each of the fifty plates is accompanied by a brief essay providing additional information on the particular town or fort illustrated. Plate 30 provides a useful corrective to any idea that “the colonial project” was a powerful, always focused, engine of change. In 1766 a French engineer, Bourcet, proposed to rebuild Pondicherry’s damaged fortifications on innovative principles. This was approved in 1769, but its author was recalled in 1770 and replaced by a patronage appointee who preferred the older style of fortifications. The new officer commenced destruction of Bourcet’s walls, but was, in turn, recalled, and Bourcet sent back. The work was interrupted repeatedly and never completed. When an English army attacked in 1783, Pondicherry fell. This story has been told before by the late Professor S. P. Sen, but Lafont provides us with a reproduction of Bourcet’s actual plan.[1]

Lafont supplements the individual essays with a brief survey of European-Indian relations highlighting the policies and practices of the French interests in the East. He notes how, in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, France’s Foreign Minister Etienne-Francois de Choiseul inaugurated a strategy which Lafont tactfully describes as “an interesting mixture of pragmatism and idealism” (p. 5) of seeking to promote and maintain a balance of power in the subcontinent through a policy of aiding Indian rulers to form alliances against the English East India Company. For Choiseul, one might imagine it was indeed the “only choice.” The maps and plans illustrate that even from a situation of relative weakness, the French remained deeply engaged in the affairs of India through the end of the century.

While *Chitra* usefully draws attention to the maps and illustrations of Indian cities in French archives, its scope remains limited. Indeed, the maps of Awadh by Jean-Baptiste Gentil have already been published by Susan Gole.[2] Gole’s other publications of historic Indian maps stimulates Lafont to comment that those maps “are very different from those made by the French engineers. They demonstrate that there were major differences in the perception of space and importantly, of man’s mastering of space, as it existed in Europe and in India at that time” (p. 14). It may be that this is correct, but regrettably, no Indian examples of plans, if they exist, of the cities documented in *Chitra* have been included. Finally, scholars of the history of urbanization in India will realize the greatest benefits of Lafont’s collection to the extent that they have access to other maps of the given cities and towns. My appreciation of Lafitte de Brassier’s “Plan de l’Ile de Bombay en 1777” (pp. 36-39) was heightened because I was familiar with other maps of the same period. These caveats aside, this work is a useful and interesting addition to the history of Indian cartography and to the study of historical evolution of Indian coastal towns and cities.

Notes

[1]. Siba Pada Sen, *The French in India, 1763-1816* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958).

[2]. *Maps of Mughal India drawn by Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil, agent for the French Government to the court of Shuja-ad-daula at Faizabad, in 1770* with text by Susan Gole (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988). See also Susan Gole, *Early Maps of India* (Edinburgh: Charles Skilton, 1978) and *India within the Ganges* (New Delhi: Jayaprints, 1983).

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