# Nawabi Karnatak: Muhammad Ali Khan in the Making of a Mughal Successor State in Pre-colonial South India, 1749-1795

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## Conclusion to Part III

From the discussions above, it is unnecessary to re-examine whether or not commensurability existed in East-West encounters in late-eighteenth-century Nawabi Karnatak. It is clear that all the participants knew perfectly well the rules of the games they were playing, and they also understood various aspects of the acculturation and syncretism of local and European elements from civil and military personnel, mercantile approaches, military technology and management, political ideas and practices, codes of honor, diplomatic ritual, artistic tastes, styles of entertainment, and so on. As mentioned earlier, my discussion in Part III sought to be a supplement to Van Meersbergen's debates on Euro-South Asian encounters during the early modern period in two main ways. First, my study of the Karnatak Nawab shows that South Asians were no less able and open to embracing and adapting foreign customs and technologies than were their European counterparts. Secondly, I have highlighted the local viewpoint by tracing the motives and/or approaches of the Karnatak Nawab in his enthusiastic attempts to penetrate the European world and embrace European elements.

Himself entangled in the various branches of the EIC's business, the Nawab not only sought a share in its lucrative work, he also utilized various mercantile approaches to maintain and increase his political influence over the population. His attempts to be the textile broker between the EIC and local weavers and to be the sole revenue farmer of the EIC's Jagirs were, for example, aimed at limiting direct contacts and preventing links between the British (and their employees) and local societies. This argument is supported by the long-term failure of the EIC to survey its own Jagirs due to the Nawab's interference. The Nawab's tactic of applying revenue farming for political ends can be compared to many other early modern South Asian rulers. However, his attempts to profit in and expand his political influence over the neighboring state of the Deccan (in the Northern Circars) by using this old tactic in combination with the assistance of his influential friend the EIC was remarkable. The Nawab's embrace of various European cultural elements and practices highlights clearly his unrestricted worldview and his desire to incorporate into his micro-cosmos of Chepauk Palace all potential elements that could support his political power and social status, as he also did with Perso-Islamic and Indic ones. Due to the rapid rise of the Europeans as the new, dominant power in South Asia—politically, militarily, and economically—European culture, knowledge, and technologies were increasingly acknowledged by local societies as symbols of power and refinement. It is likely that the Nawab had realized that he was caught in a transitional period and quickly learned to utilize them. While European cultural elements

served him well in embellishing his kingship ideologically, adoption of European military elements significantly increased his real political power.

However, by becoming increasingly entangled in the rising power of the EIC, the Nawab faced many challenges and significant costs. In *realpolitik*, the Nawab increasingly realized, from the end of 1760s, that he had lost control of Karnatak's military to the EIC, which significantly affected his autonomy in both internal and external affairs. As a result, his prestige as an independent ruler and as the supreme ruler of Karnatak was severely compromised ideologically in the eyes of both his neighbors and his local subjects. From the earliest period, when the Nawab began to mix with the EIC's officers and embrace European elements, he had always been careful to maintain his position at the top of his micro-cosmos. Many rituals and symbolic gestures from local South Asian systems, which represented the patron-client relationship, were repeatedly performed to stress the Nawab's position as patron of the British agents in Madras, such as the grants of khilats and local honorifics to prominent EIC officers. Also, by referring to the lands granted to the EIC as "jagirs," he clearly wanted the Company's employees to be perceived as one of his jagirdar. However, from the beginning of the 1770s, when the Nawab increasingly felt his prestige being attacked, he made many attempts to reposition himself in the Nawab-EIC relationship to display his overlordship of the latter in the eyes of local audiences. His successful invitation to the British king' representatives to come to his court during this period gave the Nawab an excellent opportunity to pursue his goal. Through various rituals and performances in diplomatic exchanges, the Nawab displayed his acceptance of the British king as his suzerain and protector and, at the same time, incorporated the two British king's ambassadors (who were also prominent admirals in British Royal Navy) into his micro-cosmos as his servants. Through the support of the king's men, the Nawab also successfully obliged all British gentlemen in Madras to address him using the terms "Highness" and "arddasht." Through such examples, the Nawab proceeded to fashion himself in a rank comparable to that of a sovereign prince in Europe. By being acknowledged and treated by the British king's representatives as a sovereign prince and their overlord, the Nawab thus, at least symbolically, became the master of all the British Company's servants in South Asia. The signs of the Nawab's reception of the British king's suzerainty over him were unmistakable. He referred to King George III using the term padshah and claimed to be referred to by the latter as his (subordinate) brother. The Nawab also wore the sword he had received from the king in public ceremonies and urged the latter to send him some British royal ensigns and

decorations. However, I suggest that one should not view the nominal acceptance of the British king as his overlord as something negative. In his worldview, the Nawab placed the British king in the same position as the Mughal emperors and Ottoman sultans. In this light, the acknowledgement, protection, and brotherly love from this greater ruler only gave the Nawab more prestige on the interregional level. With the rising power of the British Company during that period, the prestige of the British Padshah was also increasingly relevant in South Asia during the eclipse of the Mughal imperial house.

During their time in Madras, the Nawab also attempted to use the power of the king's ministers in various *realpolitik* businesses, such as in the farming of the Northern Circars, his re-negotiations with the Madras Presidency about extraterritorial jurisdiction rights, and disputing rights over the Nawab-EIC joint force during the Tanjore conquests. However, in fact, it is hard to evaluate to what extent the British king's ministers really contributed to the Nawab's achievements in these tasks. Because, as well as lobbying the king's ministers, the Nawab also sought to achieve his goals via various other means, especially his old tactic of under-the-table negotiations with various individual EIC servants in Madras. Yet it could be supposed that direct contacts with the king's ministers and the British government did not yield as much fruit as the Nawab may have expected. Because, after the second king's minister left in 1774, the local ruler was not as keen to have the British king's representatives in his court as he had been before. It is likely that he seemed to have realized that the symbolic incorporation of himself into the political networks of the British king did not significantly increase his political bargaining power over the EIC. In fact, around the same time that the second king's minister departed from Madras, the Nawab had begun to form new potential alliances, with some private British adventurers who had close links to the faction of Warren Hastings in the EIC.

There is one vital point I would like to make here on the strategy of the Nawab in embracing the British king and government at his court. The main goal of the king's ministers during their stay in Karnatak was to get the Nawab to trust them and throw himself upon the protection of the British government, which meant revealing every corruption of the Company's servants in Madras and allowing the British government to intervene in the Company's affairs. This is the main reason why, throughout their time there, the king's people tried to please the Nawab as much as they could and often became an instrument in his fight with the EIC's servants. However, as the cases of the king's ministers and of Warren Hastings both suggest, it was never the Nawab's intention to simply change from an old ally

to a new potential one. The Nawab never wished to destroy the Madras Presidency, which had always been his closest and securest resource of financial and military assistance, one whose interests were intertwined with his. Only when he was in significant conflict with some of the Madras Governors or Council members would he draw other potential rivals of the Madras Presidency into the game and play them off against each other to increase his bargaining power. After all, the Nawab never trusted any European individual or group too much and was always ready to bring in potential new allies. This again echoes how the local practice of fitna was often used by the Nawab in his dealings with the Europeans.

Another crucial conclusion from the case of the Karnatak Nawab is that the British transformation into an imperial power in this area was the end-product of ongoing negotiations and the triangular competition between the EIC, the local ruler, and the British government in British-South Asian politics from the 1770s; it was the culmination of their efforts, reactions and counter-reactions, in which they made use of one another to serve their immediate purposes while at the same time preventing themselves from becoming a political and military stooge of any one else. None of them had a long-term plan with imperialism as the end result. The final victor was the British government, at the expense of both the older players, i.e. the Nawab and the old-style EIC's officers. While, in the end, the Karnatak Nawab could not avoid succumbing to British power, he had played an active role in bringing about the rise of the British government. But, if one wants to see what, from the Nawab's side, was wrong with his approach to state formation and which led to his failure to resist the British's domination, the military pillar should probably receive the most attention. While the Nawab could manage economic affairs well and clearly won the ritual battles with the EIC, from the late 1760s his military designs did not go as planned. As is acknowledged by modern scholars, after witnessing the capability of European armies from the mid-1740s, almost all South Asian rulers wanted to have European mercenaries and/or standing troops of indigenous sepoys drilled in the European style and equipped with European weapons to serve in their army. In South India, the Nawab's neighboring rulers in Mysore, Maratha, and Travancore actively increased their revenue in order to fund their standing armies and hire European mercenaries to discipline them. The Deccan Nizam, as well as hiring some Europeans to drill his native forces, tried to gain a military alliance contract with the European Companies. In 1752-1759, he traded some regions of the Northern Circars to the French CIO in exchange for its sepoys and in order to keep his throne. In 1768, under the condition of relinquishing the Northern Circars to the British, the Nizam gained a promise

from the EIC to provide him with two infantry battalions and six pieces of artillery in every "proper" business for the defense of his country. In 1779, Prince Basalat Jang of the Deccan also agreed to give Guntur district to the EIC in exchange for a few battalions of its sepoys. In fact, if the costs he had to pay are ignored, it can be said that the Karnatak Nawab attained much greater success in his military ambitions than did any of his neighbors. He could gain easy access to large numbers of the best British military officers in South India, who were always lent to him by the EIC to drill his private forces. Furthermore, the establishment of the twelve battalions of the joint force allowed him to possess the most formidable European-style army in South India at the time. According to Subrahmanyam, military commensurability was a crucial factor in many Asian states—such as China, Korea, and Japan—being able to stop the West at bay throughout the early modern period. They were perfectly prepared to embrace Western military innovations, but always adapted them to local conditions in a unique and effective way. South Asia was less capable in this respect.[1] Another modern historian, Kaushik Roy, has a similar opinion. As he argues, one main reason that South Asian warriors (in his study: Mysoreans, Marathas, and Sikhs) were not successful in resisting the European forces was their "partial Europeanization." The South Asians realized that a radical transformation of their armies to suit European warfare was necessary, and they had developed European-style infantry and embraced some Western technology, but they were unwilling to imitate the European military system completely, and still kept significant numbers of indigenous elements. The net result was an incoherent military system and a less effective warband than its Western counterparts.[2] In my opinion, the Karnatak Nawab, with his worldview unrestricted regarding new developments, went much further than did his South Asian neighbors in trying to make perfect compatibility with the European military. However, the Nawab's openness and inclusiveness, which he used well in other aspects of his consolidation of power, turned out to be a great mistake in the case of embracing aspects of the European military. The Nawab's main mistake was his miscalculation of the EIC's policies towards the joint force and his overestimation of his own ability to control his British ally. The Nawab quickly realized his mistakes and diligently worked to reverse them. The Nawab's attempts to reform his military, as well as many of his efforts to manipulate the local EIC officers to help him achieve his economic, political, and military ambitions, even though his autonomy was increasingly limited, had a high degree of success as they brought trouble and anxiety to the EIC's senior officers throughout the 1770s

[1] Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*, 20-21.
[2] Roy, "Military Synthesis in South Asia," 660-661.

and 1780s. His achievements, which reflected his unusually strong influence over the local EIC agents included: managing to move the joint force to subjugate his tributaries in 1771, 1773, 1789, and 1790; gaining of the ten-year-long revenue-farming contract of Guntur district in 1779; gaining of the titles "Highness" and "arddasht" by majority vote; securing of judicial privileges in Madras in 1773; and enticing EIC military and civil officers into his service despite many attempts by the Company to prevent this. The most extraordinary case may be the scandalous coup of Lord Pigot in 1776. However, the final consequence was the reverse of what the Nawab may have expected; his successes merely forced the EIC to use harsher measures to limit his power. The increasingly fierce competition between the Nawab and the EIC, combined with various unexpected occurrences in both India and Europe, finally led to the intervention of the British government. The Nawab fought the ever-changing circumstances inch by inch, but his minor successes in the last decade of his rule were not enough to reverse his fortunes or resist the rising force of British imperialism.

It may be also interesting here to draw comparisons between the trajectories of state formation of Nawabi Karnatak and Mysore under contemporaneous rulers, Hyder Ali (r.1761-1782) and Tipu Sultan (r.1782-1799). The latter two rulers have been known for their success in transforming Mysore into a true eighteenth-century regional state with clear breaks from the old system of the Mughal Empire. In order to be free from local aristocracy and to increase their ability to respond to European powers, from the 1750s, Hyder Ali decided to establish large standing armies which were heavily modernized in the European model. To reach their aim, a number of European mercenaries and military engineers were recruited and various European technologies adopted. European specialists were hired in manufacturing weapons, and according to French documents, the weapons produced in Mysore were of excellent quality equaling any produced in Europe.[3] From the 1760s, Hyder Ali also went further than any other South Asian rulers of the time by building up a navy, a project which was later continued by Tipu Sultan.[4] Further deviating from the old regimes, the two rulers reformed the management of agricultural land, abolished the practices of land farming, and standardized and centralized the tax collecting system, all of which help increase the stability of state revenue.[5] Tipu Sultan also created state monopoly of trade, reformed currencies,

[3] Yazdani, "Foreign Relations and Semi-Modernization," 395-398; Yazdani, "Haidar 'Ali and Tipu Sultan," 102; M.P. Sridharan, "Tipu's Drive towards Modernization: French Evidence from the 1780s," in *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), 146.
[4] Mahmud Husain, "Regulations of Tipu Sultan's Navy," in *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), 174-181.
[5] B. Sheik Ali, "Developing Agriculture: Land Tenure under Tipu Sultan," in *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), 161-164.

standardized measurement and weight, and attempted to advance state industries, in some branches with the help of Europeans. In the mid-1780s, a legation from Mysore was sent to France. His embassies were ordered to buy European novelties and to recruit to Mysore more European engineers, specialists in mines, manufacturers of clocks, glass, chinaware and mirrors, and so on, to improve local manufactures. Also, astronomers, geomancers, interpreters, physicians, and surgeons were requested in order to transfer European knowledges to Mysore.[6] Another remarkable project of Tipu was his attempt to establish a public/state company with overseas settlements/factories by imitating the organization of the European East India Companies.[7]

Many scholars such as B. Sheik Ali, M. Athar Ali, and Kaveh Yazdini have viewed the two Mysore sultans, especially Tipu Sultan, as the earliest South Asian rulers who transformed their polity into a semi- or proto-modern state, which involved characteristics such as centralized monarchy, monopoly of violence (i.e. standing armies), systematized and stable revenue organization and bureaucracy, etc. Some scholars have considered Tipu Sultan as "modernizer," "modern thinker," or at least, "a transitional figure."[8] Another eighteenth-century polity which came close to Mysore in developing a true regional state with proto-modernized direction was Travancore. Its ruler Marthanda Varma (r.1729-1758) successfully developed large modernized standing armies and stabilized state revenue by state monopoly of trade.[9]

Some aspects of Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan's trajectory were comparable to the projects of the above rulers, especially his efforts to embrace European military technologies, establish a modernized standing armies and centralize his power. It can even be argued that the Nawab of Karnatak inspired Tipu Sultan in recruiting diverse European novelties and specialists to the court and learning from European knowledges and expertise, as these were the practices of Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan from as early as the 1760s. However, I would argue that it would be going too far to view Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan along the line of a "modern thinker" who had a desire to drive his polity in the direction of a regional proto-modernized state. Despite his unrestricted worldview and openness to foreign cultures and his quick adoption of new developments and technologies of the age, he seemed to have no

[6] Yazdani, "Foreign Relations and Semi-Modernization," 395, 397, 400, 403.
[7] Yazdani, "Foreign Relations and Semi-Modernization," 398; Yazdani, "Haidar 'Ali and Tipu Sultan," 108; Iftikhar A. Khan, "The Regulations of Tipu Sultan for His State Trading Enterprise," in *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), 148-149.
[8] B. Sheikh Ali, *Tipu Sultan: A Study in Diplomacy and Confrontation* (Mysore: Rao and Rhagavan, 1982), 68, 71; M. Athar Ali, "The Passing of Empire: The Mughal Case," *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 3 (1975): 390-392; Menon, "Houses by the Sea," 162, 168, 182; Yazdani, "Haidar 'Ali and Tipu Sultan," 101.
[9] Menon, "Houses by the Sea" 172, 174, 182.

progressive ideas of reforming Karnatak's political system, bureaucracy, economy or industries beyond the conventional frame of the old-style imperial Mughal Empire he had known. The Nawab's worldview, like many of his contemporaries (e.g. the Nizams of the Deccan and the Nawabs of Awadh), was still much entrenched in the pre-modern world. The Nawab was still a ruler who viewed his subjects and polity as his private household and saw himself as the successor of the authority of those he had replaced. As I have argued earlier, it was the revival of Mughal glory in his micro-cosmos of Karnatak that constituted the core of Nawab's policies and actions. The concept of universal king could explain his inclusive policies as well as his embrace of diverse European elements and the most advanced European military technologies of the time. This also comes back to my earlier criticism of Western historiography in which the framework of modern state institutions has often been anachronistically applied to the study of pre-modern polities. At least for eighteenth-century Karnatak, a model like that of Ibn Khaldun that focuses on households and its personal relationships rather than on states and its institutions seem to provide a more suitable model approach to study the region's developments.