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Hodges, Lenny (2018) France. In: Pettigrew, W.A. and Veevers, D. (eds.) The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History, c. 1550-1750. Global Economic History Series 16. Brill, pp. 290-300. ISBN 9789004387812.

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# France

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Early modern chartered trading companies were a means for transporting state sovereignty abroad, yet to paraphrase George Orwell, some companies were more sovereign than others. Historians have traditionally arranged Dutch, British, and French East India Companies on a sliding scale between private and state control.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch are typically seen as running first and foremost a business organisation, while the French Company (1664–1769) barely ranks above the Portuguese as an appendix of state. The often-unspoken assumption is that the British Company sits serendipitously somewhere in the Goldilocks zone between these extremes. Insofar as the metropolitan context is concerned, it is impossible to overlook the long shadow of the state in the organisation of the French Company.<sup>2</sup> Its creation in 1664 owed little to independent initiative from merchants, but was rather the project of the state minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert who sought to emulate Dutch success. In spite, or perhaps because, of a state-orchestrated propaganda campaign, investors were wary of subscribing, forcing Colbert to brandish carrot and stick in the form of royal favour or wrath.<sup>3</sup> The Company struggled financially and was reorganised a number of times, perhaps most notoriously in 1719, as the financier John Law merged a number of colonial corporations into a tottering financial ‘System’ intended to help pay off state debt.<sup>4</sup> While the collapse of the Mississippi bubble ended a number of Law’s innovations, the Company survived, with the crown

- 1 Janice E Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33; Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 17, 20–1; Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 186, 202.
- 2 E.g., Danièle Bègue, *L’Organisation Juridique de la Compagnie des Indes*. (Paris, 1936); Louis Dermigny, ‘East India Company et Compagnie des Indes’, in *Sociétés et Compagnies de Commerce en Orient et dans L’Océan Indien*, ed. Michel Mollat (Paris: SEVPEN, 1970), 465–466; Reza Dibadj, ‘Compagnie des Indes: Governance and Bailout’, in *Origins of Shareholder Advocacy*, ed. Jonathan G.S. Koppell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 168–186.
- 3 Glenn Joseph Ames, *Colbert, Mercantilism, and the French Quest for Asian Trade* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 23–7.
- 4 Albert Girard, ‘La Réorganisation de La Compagnie Des Indes (1719–1723)’, *Revue D’histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 11:1 (1908): 5–34; and 11:3 (1908):177–87

exercising control through royal commissioners and inspectors. Shareholders were assured regular dividends from the revenue of the tobacco and coffee farms, independent of commercial profitability.<sup>5</sup> Although some historians have echoed Enlightenment *philosophes* in attacking the state's 'despotism' over shareholders and directors, this picture does not hold up for the entire period.<sup>6</sup> Following a substantial loan made to the Company the shareholders gained the right to hold regular meetings in 1745 (which had been abandoned since 1728), and won much more significant powers in 1764 following the disastrous outcome of the Seven Years War.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the last years of the debt-ridden French Company were marked by significant political struggle between a self-proclaimed 'republic' of shareholders and the representatives of the King.<sup>8</sup>

Yet rather than limiting ourselves to metropolitan perspectives, it is crucial to set the French East India Company more firmly in its Indian context. One of the most enduring puzzles of the French Company is how, under its aegis, the French engaged in a dress rehearsal for empire-building in the Carnatic and the Deccan, setting the stage for the eventually more successful British intervention in Bengal. In return for military support provided to Indian rulers, for a brief period the French gained the right to raise revenue across large swathes of territory and wielded the trappings of Mughal sovereignty, with many individuals making significant personal fortunes. In this respect, the idea of the corporation as a protagonist in global history is to be especially welcomed in offering the chance to reframe a largely outdated historiography on the French East India Company's role in imperial expansion. With a few exceptions, this literature has remained rooted in the Third Republic 'great man' school of history, overshadowed by the contentious figure of Joseph-François Dupleix, Governor of French India from 1742 to 1754.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the many thoughtful chapters

5 For a helpful overview in English, see Pierre H. Boule, 'French Mercantilism, Commercial Companies and Colonial Profitability', in *Companies and Trade: Essays on Overseas Trading Companies during the Ancien Régime*, eds. L. Blussé and F. Gaastra (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1981), 91–117.

6 S.P. Sen, *The French in India, 1763–1816* (Kolkata: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958), 41.

7 On the varying influence and composition of the shareholders, represented by syndics, see Philippe Haudrère, *La Compagnie Française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005), 1:115–129.

8 Kenneth Margerison, 'The Shareholders' Revolt at the Compagnie des Indes: Commerce and Political Culture in Old Regime France', *French History* 20:1 (2006): 25–51.

9 For the classic French study, see Alfred Martineau, *Dupleix et l'Inde française*, 4 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1920–1928). For recent exceptions, see Catherine Manning, *Fortunes a Faire: The French in Asian Trade, 1719–48* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 195–218; Haudrère, *La Compagnie Française des Indes*, 2:717–744.

in this volume suggest a number of starting points for recalibrating our understanding of the French East India Company, and the important role it played during this crucial period.

In order to better probe the corporate sociology of the French Company, and to think about what might constitute its distinguishing features, I will draw upon my research into the religious governance of the Company in India. This will respond directly to the five features of global corporations that William Pettigrew and David Veevers identify, and offer implicit comparisons with the other chapters. Zealous missionary activity and religious persecution initially stymied the development of Pondicherry, the Company's headquarters in India, as Hindu weavers and traders simply threatened to abandon the town. However, the appointment of an Ecclesiastical Director in 1724 permitted a greater degree of leeway in religious policies, while still ensuring that the Company did not lose sight of missionary objectives. Needless to say, this eventual 'toleration' of the visible signs of Hindu religiosity did not represent a far-sighted mutual acceptance, but rather a tense equilibrium between Company authorities, missionaries, and the local population.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the Company's religious policies, therefore, provides the ideal ground to test the relationship between a given corporation and its home state, its relative 'autonomy' or 'subordination'. Lest this seem too specific a focus, this example should give us the further opportunity to test the concepts themselves, and how far they are able to encapsulate the French experience.

In the early years of French establishment at Pondicherry, located south of Madras on the Coromandel coast, religious struggles dominated the small colony, overshadowing its meagre commercial activities.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, it should be remembered that missionary activity was in fact a prescribed aim of the Company in its 1664 founding charter.<sup>12</sup> This was elaborated further in the official literature that followed the charter, according to which 'God, whose ways are innumerable, has awakened in our days the means of commerce, in order to introduce Christianity among the infidel

10 For contemporaries' understanding of toleration see, Benjamin J Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8–9.

11 On the early operations of the Company, see Marie Ménard-Jacob, *La Première Compagnie des Indes: 1664–1704 : Apprentissages, Échecs et Héritage* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016).

12 France (Louis XIV), *Déclarations du Roy: l'une, portant établissement d'une Compagnie pour le commerce des Indes Orientales; l'autre en faveur des officiers de son Conseil et Cours Souveraines intéressées, en ladite Compagnie et en celle des Indes Occidentales* (Paris, 1664), 17.

Nations'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, religious motivations had long underpinned the creation of monopoly companies in France, such as the Company of One Hundred Associates (1627–1663), which attempted to undertake the colonisation of New France.<sup>14</sup> Fusing religion and trade, however, was in practice a much trickier business than such declarations suggested. A succession of indebted and embattled Governors found themselves trapped by a seemingly intractable dilemma: the impossibility of pursuing the aims of trade at the same time as pursuing evangelism and Catholic supremacy in an overwhelmingly Hindu town.<sup>15</sup> The participation in a commercial world dominated by non-Christians, as well as the need to attract indigenous weavers and merchants, thus had to be balanced against a competing arithmetic of converted souls.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, this calculation was not something decided upon by Company authorities alone, as missionary networks meant that complaints could draw unwelcome attention at home about public displays of Hindu religiosity.

The most vociferous in their denunciations were the Jesuits, that other transnational 'Company' who settled in Pondicherry after having been expelled from Siam in the palace revolution of 1688.<sup>17</sup> However, it was not until 1699, after Pondicherry was returned to the French by the Dutch under the treaty of Ryswick, that religious matters really came to the fore. On 14 September, the Superior Council led by Governor François Martin (1681–1706) wrote to

13 François Charpentier, *Relation de l'établissement de la Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales*, (Paris, 1666), 'Epistre'.

14 Lucien Campeau, *Les Cent-Associés et le peuplement de la Nouvelle-France (1633–1663)* (Montreal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1974), 10. For an excellent article that treats the Company of One Hundred Associates as a global protagonist in French state formation, see Helen Dewar, 'Souveraineté dans les colonies, souveraineté en métropole : le rôle de la Nouvelle-France dans la consolidation de l'autorité maritime en France, 1620–1628', *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 64:3–4 (2011): 63–92. See also Edward Cavanagh, 'Possession and Dispossession in Corporate New France, 1600–1663: Debunking a "Juridical History" and Revisiting *Terra Nullius*', *Law and History Review* 32:1 (2014): 97–125.

15 For modern estimations of 50,000–60,000 inhabitants in 1710, with perhaps 200 Europeans, see Gérard Le Bouëdec et al., 'Les Compagnies des Indes et les ports-comptoirs (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)', in *Les Européens dans les ports en situation coloniale, XVIe–XXe siècle*, ed. Jean-François Klein et Bruno Marnot (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 30–1. The Muslim population of Pondicherry was small and not perceived as a target population by missionaries.

16 For trading conditions on the Coromandel, see Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies, and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650–1740* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

17 On the Jesuits in India and Siam, Ines G Županov, *Disputed Mission Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Raphaël Vongsuravataka, *Un Jésuite à la Cour de Siam* (Paris: France-Empire, 1992).

the Directors in Paris to ask for advice on what to do about the town's mosque and three Hindu temples. It is not surprising that the French were uncertain in their religious policies. Although it may have been widely perceived among their employees in India that it was necessary to follow other Europeans in permitting freedom of religion in order to attract trade and inhabitants to their colonies, this was not so obvious in France.<sup>18</sup> His Most Christian Majesty was an enthusiastic proponent of 'temple' destruction in the metropole, as Protestant places of worship had been systematically eradicated under the rule of Louis XIV (1643–1715). While scholars have estimated around 700 temples existed in France in the middle of the seventeenth century, by 1685 with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, there were no more than fifteen.<sup>19</sup> The importance of eradicating non-Catholic religious space was signalled by the very first article in the Edict of revocation, which ordered the immediate destruction of any remaining temples.<sup>20</sup> Aware of this metropolitan precedent, and perhaps emboldened by recent letters patent permitting them to establish themselves in any Company town in India, local Jesuit missionaries began to agitate for religious reform.

Although if Governor Martin may have initially attempted to eradicate public displays of Hinduism, it quickly became clear that the Hindu population of Pondicherry would not take such restrictions lying down. When in August 1701 he demanded an end to public ceremonies and the closure of a temple, he was faced with a 'kind of uprising'. He claimed that 12,000 to 15,000 people assembled in the streets, demanding the gates of the town be opened to let them leave. While the Governor may have presented himself as heroically riding out to reprimand the crowd, reminding them of their obligations to the Company and condemning their 'sedition', there can be little doubt that in the French administration had been cowed. Following this showdown, he wrote to the Company that, 'in regard to destroying the Pagodas [temples] and entirely abolishing paganism, we can only do this by depopulating Pondicherry [of] the majority of its inhabitants'.<sup>21</sup> Depopulation went completely against the grain of the established logic of economic thought, according to which a large

18 Aix-en-Provence, Archives Nationales d'outre-mer, (hereafter ANOM), COL C<sup>2</sup> 65, 31.

19 Daniel Ligou, 'Un vandalisme oublié: la destruction des temples réformés par l'autorité royale au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Révolution française et « vandalisme révolutionnaire »*, eds. Simone Bernard-Griffiths et al. (Paris: Universitas, 1992), 336–7.

20 Bernard Dompnier, 'La Logique d'une destruction: L'Eglise catholique, la royauté et les temples protestants (1680–1685)', in *Ibid.*, 343.

21 ANOM, COL C<sup>2</sup> 66, 164r–164v, 180v.

population was key to a colony's wealth.<sup>22</sup> The danger of mass desertion, therefore, was an important bargaining chip held by Pondicherry's Hindu population, and Danna Agmon has shown how on further occasions it could be used to force the Governor's hand.<sup>23</sup>

Facing indigenous resistance on the one hand, the French administration faced pressure from the Jesuits on the other, in ways that might be just as direct. In December 1701, the Jesuit Father La Breuille gave a special sermon on the saint day of François Xavier, in front of the Governor and Council, during which he exhorted them to 'destroy these temples and entirely abolish paganism in Pondicherry following the example of our great King who has destroyed heresy in France'. Skilfully exploiting the gap between religious governance at home and in Pondicherry, La Breuille was able to publicly shame the administration, claiming that they cared only to 'fill the coffers of [their] masters'.<sup>24</sup> While the subversive nature of such a sermon was certainly not lost on Company authorities, it seems there was little they could do to stop such dissidence. In fact, this was only the prelude for a much more inflammatory episode, as in 1708 a Hindu named Nayiniyappa was appointed to the position of indigenous broker in Pondicherry. This choice proved completely unacceptable to the Jesuits, who claimed the position should only be held by an indigenous Christian. As the 'Nayiniyappa Affair' unravelled over the following decade, the French colony was rocked by turbulence and unrest, with a rapid turnover of Governors who proved unable to chart a course between the demands of commerce and missionary activity.<sup>25</sup>

These struggles over the French Company's religious policies on the ground underscore the ways in which its particular 'corporate sociology' limited its flexibility in matters of governance. Due to the Company's greater degree of imbrication with its home state compared to its English and Dutch rivals, missionary networks and hierarchies wielded an effective counterbalance to local Governors. For instance, in 1705 the Jesuits took matters into their own hands and raided the main Hindu temple. While this led to four days of rioting among the Hindu population, Company authorities in Pondicherry felt unable

22 Philip J Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

23 Danna Agmon, 'Striking Pondichéry: Religious Disputes and French Authority in an Indian Colony of the Ancien Régime', *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 3 (2014): 437–67.

24 ANOM, COL C<sup>2</sup> 66, 180v.

25 The forthcoming publication of Danna Agmon's book on the Nayiniyappa affair will doubtless shed much new light on this important event. Until then the principal published work on the affair remains, Paul Olganier, *Les Jésuites à Pondichéry et l'affaire Nayiniyappa, 1705 à 1720* (Paris: Leroux, 1932).

to punish any of the French Jesuit offenders, although their Indian catechists were apparently fair game.<sup>26</sup> One source even claimed that the Company could only be assured that the Jesuits would no longer enter Hindu temples through the intervention of François d'Aix de La Chaise, the King's Jesuit confessor. Missionary networks and connections further restricted the Company's freedom to mint coins with Hindu iconography. Initially the Directors wrote to Pondicherry in 1706 to dismiss complaints from local religious figures, claiming 'it is not a fact of religion'. These instructions were retracted the very next year, however, as the directors had been informed by a missionary that the Portuguese did not mint coins with idols.<sup>27</sup> This was a familiar pattern, and the Company spent a considerable amount of energy and effort contesting claims made by the Jesuits, as can be seen in a *mémoire* sent to the King in 1711.<sup>28</sup> This fascinating document attests to a lengthy tripartite negotiation between the Company, Crown and Jesuits over the course of three years. At the crux of these negotiations was disputed knowledge about India and what this entailed for adopting a feasible religious policy in Pondicherry. To give a flavour of this, one article proposed by the Jesuits demanded that the Company forbid Pariahs (untouchables or Dalits), whether Christian or Hindu, from wearing European clothes.<sup>29</sup> In contesting this article, the Company directors pointed out that 'the great majority of Topass soldiers of the garrison are of the Pariah Caste', and so it would be necessary to exempt them from any such regulation, adding that 'everywhere else the Pariahs have the freedom to dress how they choose'.<sup>30</sup> In this way, missionary hierarchies and networks forced the Company to engage with and justify their policies on a home stage, a performance that more juridically evasive companies might be better able to avoid altogether.

The Company and its Governors were ultimately ill-equipped to engage with missionaries' arguments about how Pondicherry should be run, since in doing

26 Agmon, 'Striking Pondichéry', 459.

27 For these examples see, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, (hereafter BNF), Français 6231, *Mémoire sur la Compagnie des Indes Orientales (1642–1720)*, 401–411.

28 ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 38, 'Mémoire des demandes faites par les R. pères Jésuites, missionnaires des Indes établis à Pontichéry, touchant la religion', 14 February 1711.

29 On the Jesuit practice of engaging with caste distinctions, see Paolo Aranha, 'The Social and Physical Spaces of the Malabar Rites Controversy', in *Space and Conversion in Global Perspective*, eds. Giuseppe Marcocci et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 214–232.

30 For the Company's responses, see ANOM, F<sup>5</sup>A 38, 'Responses aux Decisions Touchant la Religion', 1 October 1714. Topasses were Christians who claimed some measure of Portuguese descent. On the difference between *Métis* and *Topas* in French India, see Adrian Carton, *Mixed-Race and Modernity in Colonial India: Changing Concepts of Hybridity Across Empires* (London: Routledge, 2012), 89.

so they could be dragged into a mire of theological controversy. For this reason, the appointment of an Ecclesiastical Director in 1724 was an important step in insulating the Pondicherry Governor and Council from the often-fractional disputes between the different missionary groups, and the perceived meddling of the Jesuits. As outlined in the memorandum justifying the creation of the post, it was stated that the large number of clergymen, chaplains and missionaries maintained by the Company required 'an attention that is unbefitting to laymen'. The Company's religious obligations, therefore, 'lawfully [fell] under the competence of a man of the Church'.<sup>31</sup> The new Director's role also reflected the burgeoning scientific spirit infusing the French colonial project, as he was also responsible for gathering information about new discoveries, curiosities and books.<sup>32</sup> Abbé Gilles-Bernard Raguet (1724–1731) was the first and only holder of this position. He might be thought of as something of a religious consultant, who could respond to the knotty theological problems brought up by Pondicherry-based missionaries, with an expertise and authority beyond what the Company could otherwise provide.<sup>33</sup> This is not to suggest that Raguet was half-hearted in his religious convictions. He was a staunch defender of missionary activity, who supported the Jesuits on numerous occasions.<sup>34</sup> Instead, he sought a means of reconciling the aims of commerce and Catholicism and in this sense his appointment was a very belated afterthought to realising the religious article of the Company's 1664 charter.

In Raguet's correspondence, we can see that from his Paris office he worked hard to ensure that relations were harmonious between the different missionary orders, as well as with Company authorities. For instance, he exhorted the Jesuit superior of Pondicherry to make sure his native neophytes did not stir up trouble, a longstanding complaint of the town's Governors.<sup>35</sup> When a Capuchin missionary cited theological texts to question the practice of minting of coins with idols, Raguet ably brushed away any complaints: 'the idol being nothing but a distinctive mark, it would be the same as a snail if it pleased

31 Paris, Archives Nationales, M 1027, 'Mémoire pour l'Établissement d'un Directeur Ecclesiastique [sic] dans la Compagnie des Indes'.

32 See James Edward McClellan and François Regourd, *The Colonial Machine: French Science and Overseas Expansion in the Old Regime* (Turhout: Brepols, 2011).

33 Raguet was also an important figure in the Company's administration of Louisiana, see Charles Edwards O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana: Policy and Politics to 1732* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 155–6; Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française: La Louisiane après le système de Law, 1721–1723*, vol. 4 (Paris: Presses Universtaires de France, 1974), 35–9.

34 He was himself a Sulpician.

35 ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 37/4, Letter from Raguet to Jean-Venant Bouchet, 24 September 1726.

the Prince'.<sup>36</sup> Yet neither did Raguét abandon the pursuit of missionary goals, and he was ready to put pressure on Governor Pierre-Christophe Lenoir (1721–23, 1726–34) to take action against Hindu processions and celebrations when he felt the latter was not doing enough. Raguét nonetheless emphasised that this should be done 'wisely', suggesting to Lenoir a policy of attrition, such as gradually restricting the number of religious holidays celebrated by Hindus in Pondicherry.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most important of all, however, were the recommendations made by Raguét to his patron, the powerful minister of state Cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury, about the Company's religious governance.<sup>38</sup> In several memoranda and letters to the Cardinal, Raguét drew on information from his Jesuit informants and reports from Company servants, weighing up both commercial and religious considerations.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps what the figure of Raguét best illustrates, therefore, is how difficult it becomes to separate state and corporate interests. In this sense, a corporate sociology pertinent to our French example might require a slightly different vocabulary to that of relative 'autonomy' or 'subordination', one which could better capture the more interventionist, not to say creative, role of the state within its corporate guise.

### Conclusion

It is perhaps too easy a cliché to conclude a discussion of the distinctive qualities of French trading corporations with the invocation of French *dirigisme*. Nonetheless, even though often characterised as an appendix of the state, the French Company was able to integrate and respond to non-European interests in its own particular way. Changing metropolitan governments, as well as French Catholicism are certainly complicating factors, yet what is striking is how this response can itself be conceived as an act of state-building, the appointment of a Director integrated into the ministerial patronage system which characterised the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>40</sup> Phillip Stern may have taught us to see how companies could be states, but the French case shows that states could be companies.

36 ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 39/2, Letter from Raguét to Antoine de La Châtre, 16 December 1729.

37 ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 39/4, Letter from Raguét to Pierre-Christophe Lenoir, 15 December 1729 and 20 November 1730.

38 On Fleury, see Peter Robert Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720–1745* (London: Routledge, 1996).

39 See ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 37/4, 'Mémoire sur les Mosquées et Pagodes de Pondichéry', c. 1726; ANOM, COL F<sup>5</sup>A 49/1, Letter from Raguét to Fleury, 3 November 1726.

40 Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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