

SOVEREIGN'S FORT: EARLY BRITISH IN INDIA

Aryama Ghosh

Research Scholar, Department of History, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received: 09 Aug 2018

Accepted: 16 Aug 2018

Published: 25 Aug 2018

ABSTRACT

The history of 'proto-colonial' forts is often seen as either defensive establishment or as a scheme of the veiled offensive spearhead. But a global analogy of various 'proto-colonial' fortified establishment will show that there was no unlined development or unbroken continuity. Based on the study of British fortifications in Bengal this article tries to argue that fortification had a tendency of turning into a sovereign entity by practicing a particular military-fiscal practice of protection and extraction. This tendency was developed slowly and influenced by adopting multiple events and short termed objectives. Even the native influences and parallel developments helped the structural as well as the abstract development of this fortification based sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: *Fortification, Sovereignty, Military-Fiscal State, Fort William*

INTRODUCTION

“If you entrench yourself behind strong fortifications, you compel the enemy seek a solution elsewhere.”

___ Carl von Clausewitz

This kind of indifference of the theorists, which has shaped the continental warfare was not very much shared by the European powers in case of colonial warfare. This kind of divergence in the strategic thinking of continent and colony had influenced the growth of European powers as the new sovereigns. For the colonies it is rather the Renaissance interest of 'well-fortified' cities, was the fulcrum of strategic values.¹ The older interpretation of this strategic attitude was not seen as any offensive claims for penetration, rather as a defensive mechanism against the might of the native forces.² Even the early British writings in case of India mention about the obviousness of fortification, against the predatory political situation of the colonies. They have argued that from the nascent beginnings fortifications were done due to the anxious efforts for securing the trade rather than any offensive drive for conquest.³ These kinds of arguments lead to the comprehensive, conventional, imperial opinion that the conquest was accidental, a theory of "fortuitous acquisition."⁴ The newer generation of historians like Philip Stern has inversed the argument by showing Company as a political body with sense of sovereignty and ability to perform like a state. Now in this backdrop of newer interpretation, the history of 'proto-colonial' fortifications asks for the necessity of newer investigation.

The British colonial approaches in India had their strategical schemes derived not only from their own colonial pasts but also from the experiences of their rivals. So the British fortification motivation only can be studied properly when they will be compared in respect of their European rivals. All these 'proto-colonial' defensive architectures were a symbiotic mixture of local modification and European plans.⁵ Just like the case of Spanish forts in Latin American colonies, earlier fortifications were nothing but crudely built palisades made of locally available materials until they had to counter local ill-equipped tribes. With the growth of European enemies in later days, those same forts turned into angular bastioned fortresses in later days.⁶ The British cases were not very different from those early Spanish forts. In case Fort William though often plans of European engineers and planners were outsourced, the practical use of them was always considered in respect of the local circumstances. Just like in case of the design it was proposed to make like a pentagon in a European angular plan, but made in a rectangular after. During the mid-18th century with the growth of Maratha menace huge portion of outer defense was planned, manned and financed by the native inhabitants about which we will discuss later. So, the structural modifications of early fortresses had differed due to commercial interests, topography, enemies against whom protection was needed etc. In spite of these differences, there is one similarity and that is regarding the ingrained sovereign interest of those fortified possessions. The focus of those sovereign positions differed too. While in case of Portuguese, their string of forts faced towards the sea to secure their 'Estado da India' intact, British sovereign interests were linked with their penetrating tendency towards interior.

All the 'proto-colonial' forts were primarily defensive and it is only with the change of time turned into amalgams of the offensive-defensive unit. The urge for defense only comes when somebody "gains a position worth defending."⁷ Due to these "positions worth defending", Company's relationship with the native powers like Bengal and Arcot throughout the Eighteenth century "was dominated by fractious, fortified peace".⁸ This kind of fortified peace has a long tradition in European colonial history, while here the long continuity of the British model will be discussed. Bal Krishna has traced that tendency from the time of 1600-1602 when the Britishers were busy in the struggle with the Dutch in the Spice Islands.⁹ Struggle for garrisoned positions can be traced even before that when in 1588 British had landed in St. Helena. St. Helena was fortified by the Dutch in 1651 only to be ousted by the British in the same year.¹⁰ Another that kind of case can be found in Saldanah captured by Edward Dods worth in November 1615. The most interesting example can be found in the case of Ormuz, captured by the British as a part of a treaty with the Persians. The travel narratives of Pedro Della Velle documented a piece of conversation with the captain, who was there to conclude the treaty. Bal Krishna also has mentioned this as an example showing the ingrained character of the British conquest. Della Velle's letter describes the event likewise;

“... (He) spoke very frankly to me concerning their affairs of Ormuz. In conclusion, he told me that their treaty with the Persians stood thus: That if they would deliver to the English the Fortress of Ormuz, with half the revenues of the custom-house and the city, as they desir'd from the beginning, then the English would people Ormuz, and restore the trade as formerly, keeping the same continually open with Persia; and that for this purpose, and also for guarding the sea against Portugal and other enemies.”¹¹

Not only had that but the English continued to bargain on the matter of settling their own people. Though Della Velle himself was not pretty much sure about the profitability of that treaty in favor of English, as the “charge of maintaining the fortress of Ormuz without any profit, and the continual danger of losing it every hour, unless the English guard the sea with their ships and help to defend it.”¹² Della Velle would have misjudged the inflow of political interest of fortified offense. In the case of India, the Samudri rajas rather well known as Zamorin just like the Persians of Ormuz had been trying to expatriate the Portuguese power. Portuguese power had joined hands with neighboring powers of Cochin and Cranganore. To subdue this nexus Zamorin asked the Dutch and the English companies to form a ‘military’ alliance. English under Captain William Keeling became interested and accepted the treaty. The interesting part of the treaty is that the King has asked British help to capture Portuguese fort at Cranganore and also the fort of Cochin in lieu of returning those forts under the British.¹³ According to Subrahmanyam while the British have failed to assume the military significance of treaty, Samudri raja’s main concern was the potential military help from the British, which he had hoped for. So, it can be said that the native rulers like the Persian governors of Ormuz, Samudri rajas of South India all have followed the rule of playing one against one. Though fortification by the merchants was not an element of Indian polity, the native rulers in their dealings with the Europeans appropriated this value of the fortified settlement. The older conception can be seen in Jahangir’s letter to the East India Company where he said,

‘If you will profit, seek it at sea and in quiet trade; for without controversy, it is an error to affect garrisons and land-wars in India.’¹⁴

Long before Calcutta, East India Company had found their footholds primarily in Surat and then in Madras. So when they have entered into Calcutta, they were pretty much experienced about the tendencies of native politics. Calcutta was different from Madras, the main rally point of British East India Company at that time. While Madras area had Golkunda raja as the only potential threat, Bengal was the heart of Mughal revenue ground.¹⁵ So Bengal was lucrative for its trade but problematic for the threats. The long ingrained tendency of using force and defensively offensive attitude of the British thus found a favorable ground for practice. While Sobha Singh’s rebellion was used as the pretext for the fortification of the British factory, as we have seen the fortifying tendency had a long history. In case of Bengal, it had a start with Hodges and later on contentiously championed by Charnok.¹⁶ Though most of the officials have not supported the plan, “the idea gradually took hold of the English mind”.¹⁷ After Sobha Singh’s rebellion, Charnok’s settlement turned into the spearhead for gradual centralization of the Company’s holdings of Rajmahal or Patna. The Court

tried for gaining a holding at Chittagong but later settled with the idea of Sutanuti as the viable ground for a fortified position. The Court has written to Fort St. George that “if the Moors will allow” Sutanuti to be fortified “where our ships may go up and ride within the command of our guns”, should be secured “though it should cost us a bribe”.¹⁸ From this point, we will see a steady growth in the fortification in respect of Fort William. But the difference was the continuous growth of the sovereign position of the Company along with that. Apart from the practical defensive side of that fortification, that was the expression of the growing sovereign entity of the Company.

Sobha Singh’s rebellion and the steady progress of the rebels towards the Hoogly fort were met by different European powers in different ways. The Dutch had sent their ship Berkensteyn to bombard the rebels while Dutch contingent had captured the Hoogly fort and guarded it. When this “known superiority of European weaponry” stopped the rebels, the Britishers sent Diamond and Thomas in the same service.¹⁹ But where Dutch Company in spite of their initial enthusiasm stopped after some temporary fortification, the Britishers continued this throughout the 18th century until ‘the Bengal Revolution’. While the Dutch have not fortified properly until 1743, it’s the fear of the Dutch precedence substantially urged the British to fortify. British sense of insecurity in respect of the Dutch activities can be seen from the letter quoted by Bal Krishna. In that letter, one British official anxiously asked that in which way the Dutch were maintaining one hundred and twenty forts while it’s not possible for the British to keep at least two or three.²⁰ The answer was revenue collection from the indigenous people which were an adoption from the Dutch. So it’s not just the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty of the Indian politics but the rivalry among the European companies also has conducted the British fortification in Sutanuti.

The rebellion had urged as well as served as an excuse for forts but the continuity of it had served in the future military-fiscalism of the East India Company. Tirthankar Roy has recently said that the 18th-century successors had various modes of military fiscalism, but it’s only the Company’s way became successful.²¹ This successful military fiscalism had emanated from the parallel development of fortification and taxation of the inhabitants for the same protective architectures. This kind of protection-extraction symbiosis along with a nascent and defensive mode of defiance helped in the slow formation of the proto-sovereign entity of the ‘Company State’. By the very start of the 18th century, Britishers were aware of their position as a provider of security to the inhabitants most of whom were natives in lieu of taxes. The Court of Directors instructed Sir Charles Eyre to raise a standing amount of revenue in form of custom subsidies and other taxes as “the protected should an acknowledgment to their defenders.”²² So, ‘protection being the true foundation’ Company had attracted inhabitants in an age when security was a costly stuff.²³ Thus extraction of resources to fortify and fortification providing more rooms for revenue collection symbiotically turned Fort William into a political body with the sovereign entity. This whole process has started to nibble away from the native sovereign entity and “constituted a development of the infrastructure for imperialism.”²⁴ This drive for fortification continued throughout the 18th century and by the time of Maratha, invasion intensity increased. The only difference is that the inhabitants came to

contribute voluntarily by that time.²⁵ This was the sign of acceptance of the Company sovereignty by the natives where protection in the real sense became the foundation of it.

The growth of Calcutta has never been the convergent outcome of cohesive flow of united vested interests. It is true that Company was an outcome of vested interests but there were cracks within it. The Fort St. George at Madras was the predecessor of the Fort William at Calcutta and their relations were not always very cordial. Madras had always tried to dominate the Calcutta establishment and obviously, on the contrary part. the later tried to free itself from the former. The fortification was an outcome of that internal struggle also. Within a few years of the initial approaches of fortifying the factory successfully and having a large tract of land with substantial revenue yield, Calcutta became independent of other factories and Bengal became a new presidency.²⁶ Even the Court of Directors has declared the importance of Sutanuti for its navigability and cleared that they have no intention to remove it from its position of centrality.²⁷ This kind of support only became possible due to the success of fortification, a long-cherished interest.

British motivations for fortification have multiple dimensions. It was not only for defense but had ingrained plans of offensive takeovers. It was neither a total continuity of the European violent mercantilism due to its adaptation to the local characters. Even in the structural sense, these 'proto-colonial' forts were hybrid ones; the curious mixture of European engineering and native adaptations. Above all in spite of its gradual move towards the acquisition of sovereign position, it was never proceeded in the same space and was influenced by various short termed objectives.

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