Battles within a war

THE CARNATIC WARS
By Venkatesh Parthasarathy;
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"An episode which had a decisive impact on the course of India's history is the multi-faceted and multi-decade struggle for political supremacy that largely took place in parts of modern-day Tamil Nadu in the mid-eighteenth century. This momentous set of battles and contests is generally known as the 'Carnatic' Wars." This quote succinctly captures Venkatesh Parthasarathy's attempt to dismantle the popular imagination of the Carnatic Wars as a conflict between Joseph-François Dupleix and Robert Clive. This binary reduction is not just misleading: Parthasarathy shows rather convincingly that it is actually a gross oversimplification of the full picture.

Spread over 29 chapters and divided into three parts, Parthasarathy's book paints a remarkably evocative picture of the Carnatic Wars. This power struggle began with two groups vying to become Nawabs of Arcot in the midst of the Maratha expansion into the Deccan. These warring factions soon found themselves entrenched in the back-and-forth between the French and the English, while the Nizam sought to outmanoeuvre the Marathas next door. Even as these incidents were playing out in the subcontinent, the global conflict between the French and the English came to a head with the Seven Years' War.

It is this boiling pot of geopolitical tensions and local rivalries that, Parthasarathy argues, turned a "faction-fight among Mughal nobles on the fringes of a decaying empire into a struggle for political supremacy in South India between the French and the English". The battle for power started in the mid-1740s and played out till 1763 when a compromise between the French and the English was reached through the Treaty of Paris. Refusing to let the story collapse back into the Dupleix-Clive binary, Parthasarathy calls to attention the multiplicity of factors intersecting this episode — French *vs* English, Afghan *vs* Mughal, Commoner *vs* Aristocrat — which make the Carnatic Wars a "decisive inflection point" in Indian history.

At play in the Carnatic Wars were a complex set of characters, ranging from local rulers, such as Nasir and Muzaffar Jung, to foreign powers such as the French and the English. Parthasarathy includes perspectives from figures lost in time — notably that of Ananda Ranga Pillai, Dupleix's *Dubash* (intermediary). The author further complicates the Dupleix-Clive narrative by highlighting the fact that the Carnatic Wars were in fact a highly intricate set of power games also involving the Arcot aristocracy, the Nizams and even the Marathas. In the course of his examination of the Carnatic Wars, Parthasarathy resurrects forgotten characters to life. Putting obscure characters in dialogue with actors in a global power struggle, Parthasarathy puts the spotlight on a crucial incident in Indian history that has gone under-examined.

The depth and the extent of Parthasarathy's research make this book an authoritative work of scholarship. Despite being densely loaded with facts, figures and historical details, *The Carnatic Wars* is surprisingly readable given its lucid and accessible prose. The book will be of interest to those immersed in the political history of the subcontinent.

Abhijay Rambabu