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Streynsham Master's office: accounting for collectivity, order and authority in 17th-century India

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This paper examines the uses of writing in early modern global trade in order to argue for the constitutive role of inscription practices in the making of the social and spatial relations of mercantile capitalism. At the heart of this is a detailed study of the reform of the accounting and bookkeeping practices of the English East India Company at Fort St George carried out by Streynsham Master (1640–1724) in the late 17th century. This is used to show that the collective decision-making, social and moral order, and relationships of respect upon which the Company relied were constructed in and through the factory's consultation books, accountancy ledgers and the letters sent between England and India. This paperwork was part of the making of institutional structures and spaces which worked through a series of divisions between 'public' and 'private', and which made the 'logic' of mercantile capital evident to the Company's servants.

In the second half of the seventeenth century the English East India Company was part of a massive expansion of trade between Europe and Asia which produced a fourfold increase in the value of Asian imports into Britain between the 1660s and the 1680s.¹ The seats of this unprecedented process of capital accumulation were first the Coromandel Coast and, later, the Bay of Bengal. In order to tap into this trade the Company founded a series of factories, or trading stations. Those on the west coast of India were controlled from Surat, and later from Bombay (now Mumbai). On the east coast the key location was Fort St George (later Madras, and now Chennai). At various times those running this factory controlled not only its own trade but also that of subordinate factories along the coast – at Masulipatnam and Madapollam – and in the Bay of Bengal and its hinterland, at Hugli, Balasore, Kassimbazar, Dacca, Maulda and Patna (Figure 1). Establishing and operating these factories led to the elaboration and regulation of a range of procedures designed to enable the trade to happen and to manage the relationships between the Court of Directors in London and their employees in India. In 1675, a Company servant named Streynsham Master (1640–1724; see Figure 2) was sent out from London to take up the position of agent at

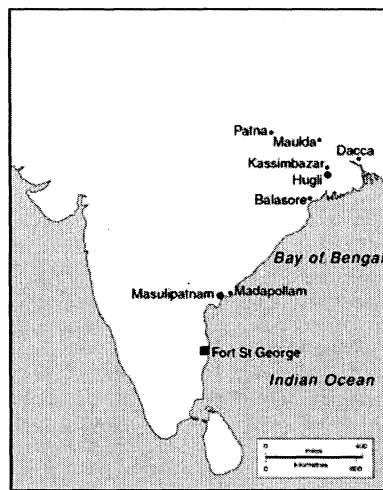


FIGURE 1 English East India Company factories on the Coromandel Coast and Bay of Bengal, c. 1680

Fort St George and, as he put it, to undertake 'ye Regulating and new Methodising their Factorys & Acco^{ts} upon ye Coast & Bay'.² In doing so he paid a great deal of attention to what, and how, those in the factories wrote. In what follows I want to consider this process of reorganizing the ways in which the Company's servants made decisions and kept their consultation books, pursued trade and tallied their accounts, and explained their actions in the letters they wrote back to London.

How, then, are these processes which connect power, knowledge and exchange through the forms of writing undertaken in the Company's Indian factories to be understood as part of the making of global trade?³ In many accounts of what we might call early modern globalization, these processes are too small scale to figure in the analysis. They are also judged to be incidental. Within world systems theory or the (pre)history of the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production, the development of the trading companies' operations are presented as the working out of the profit-seeking 'logic' of mercantile capital.⁴ Products, markets and exchange mechanisms linking different parts of the world – the core and the periphery – are part of the process of mercantile capital investment and return which operates in ways which are seemingly impersonal and inexorable, a driving force for action which affords little space for consideration of the accomplishment of the specific institutional forms and social relationships through which it worked.⁵

Those historians and economists who have studied the institutional organization of the trading companies have done so primarily in order to highlight the effectiveness, or otherwise, of their forms of operation for producing action at a distance. This has been undertaken in pursuit of arguments about the modernity of these organizations based on their profit-seeking activity and capacity, and their resolution (or not) of the 'principal-agent problem': whether the directors in London could effectively control



FIGURE 2 Sir Streynsham Master (1640–1724) by Charles D'Agar. (Published by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.)

those they had working for them overseas.⁶ These debates over economic principles share some similar features with K.N. Chaudhuri's influential modelling in the 1970s of the English East India Company using the protocols of systems theory.⁷ First, they both have a set of prior assumptions of how the Company should have operated against which its actual workings are judged, rather than attempting to understand the messy and contingent history of institutional change, and the forms of power and knowledge that it brought together. For Chaudhuri, this does mean acknowledging that a systems approach cannot adequately deal with processes of institutional reorganization, and, particularly, with how the 'system' was constructed in the first place.⁸ Second, the ways in which the Company worked, particularly the forms of writing and accounting that it used, are understood as mechanisms for achieving systemic ends that are conceived of as separate from them: making a profit, achieving compliance with orders, communicating decisions and disciplining subordinates.

Recent attempts to understand a variety of economic practices have offered a range of ways in which the problem of understanding the making of economic 'systems', and the relationship between means and ends within those systems, can escape from the internal logic of forms of thought based on reifications of 'the economy' and economics. Practitioners of 'cultural economy' have stressed the constitutive role of social and cultural relations in the making of economic practice. They have drawn attention to the range of ways in which cultural economies work, going beyond an initial focus on the identity politics of consumption to considerations of discursive constructions of the economy, cultures of economic governance, formations of desire and affect and the organization of economies through material objects and technologies.⁹ One important line of enquiry has used ideas from science studies to interrogate forms of economic knowledge and practice. As well as demonstrating the constitutive, reflexive and changing role of knowledge production in economic relationships, this has shown that the modes of knowledge which are codified as 'economics', 'accountancy' and 'economic geography' do not simply describe the economic world but are active in shaping what an economy and the economic are taken to be in the first place.¹⁰

Rather than focusing on the discursive construction of economies via the formulation of metaphors, models and meanings in the texts of economics and related disciplines, I want to pursue another intersection with science studies. This is Bruno Latour's account of the role of 'inscriptions' which, he argues, moves beyond 'extending literary criticism to technical literature'.¹¹ For Latour, inscription denotes the transformations that materialize an entity as 'a sign, an archive, a document, a piece of paper, a trace'.¹² The ways this then allows new translations and articulations as inscriptions travel has become commonplace in accounts of 'immutable mobiles' and their effects. What has received less attention are the ways in which scientific knowledge is made in the small shifts from those entities through an endless chain of inscriptions and reinscriptions. This process, Latour argues, is not one of words seeking to resemble the world across an impossibly large gap between language and nature, but a series of transformations within which each step, each inscription, 'replaces without replacing anything ... [and] summarizes without being able to substitute completely for what it has gathered'.¹³ At

each link in the chain there is a connection back to what came before: the new inscription is part of the same world. Yet there is also a process of translation that allows new actions to be performed on those inscriptions and a new construction of the world to come into being.

Much more could be said about words and worlds understood through inscriptions, but I just want to make three points to explain how and why it is useful in this context, and how it might be used to extend a concern with the geographies of reading and writing from historical geographies of scientific knowledge to those of commerce, trade and the regulation of exchange.¹⁴ First, it is striking just how much Latour is concerned with paper. His account of the making of scientific knowledge is littered with 'paper forms' and is described as a 'paper world'. Scientists, he argues, understand by acting on inscriptions and reinscriptions in ways that they cannot act on the world. Indeed, he stresses that any attempt to provide a 'hard' answer, one that involves a factual or accurate statement, to any question or controversy will mean 'bringing to the surface one of these [paper] forms. Without them we simply *don't know*.'¹⁵ Second, these inscriptions are all local forms of knowledge. Latour traces a new geography of laboratory spaces housing instruments that produce inscriptions, networks through which inscriptions travel, and centres of calculation (other laboratories, archives and collections) within which they are combined and superposed. Third, Latour is insistent that all of this applies as much to economics (and politics) as to the natural sciences. Accounting and basic economics are, for him, 'the most classical of calculations'.¹⁶ They also demonstrate the impossibility of knowing the world (in this instance 'the economy') without making it produce inscriptions – wage slips, receipts, order forms, invoices – which can be combined, recombined and reinscribed into higher-order paper forms to produce entities such as the Gross National Product or the net present value of an investment opportunity. Therefore, the calculative practices that make up economic knowledge are put to work in a paper world and, in the process, constitute and transform economic events and processes, and organizational forms and spaces.¹⁷

In what follows, these ideas are used within a detailed reconstruction of the process of institutional change in the English East India Company to show how forms of writing and accounting, as forms of power and knowledge, and as material practices, played a vital part in the process of making what were taken to be decisions, well-run factories and appropriate orders. Minutes, account books and letters, and the ways in which they were made, deployed and read, are understood as inscriptions, 'literary technologies' which helped make the world they inhabited.¹⁸ These forms of writing were active in the construction of economic and political relationships – of collectivity, order and authority – rather than simply being the more or less practical and mechanical, albeit logistically problematic, means of representing them to others.¹⁹ This means tracing out the relationships between inscriptions, organizational forms and spaces.²⁰ It will, therefore, be argued that Streysham Master's 'Regulating and new Methodiseing' sought to institute writing practices which, in their repeated performance and reinscription, attempted to constitute a crucial organizational distinction between the 'public' world of the Company's business and the 'private' actions of its servants. This reorganization through inscription also took material shape in a transformation of the

space of the factory to carve out and furnish writing offices, sites which grounded the processes of inscription and located its production of social collectivity, order and authority. These inscriptions, organizational changes and new spaces could not in themselves guarantee the Company's profitability. However, they were part of a new classification and parcelling out of actions and intentions as well as money and goods. This made real a distinction between the Company's (public) interest and private interests that formed the basis for new forms of action, including those which, in the end, caught Streynsham Master out. Finally, it is suggested that this historical geography of inscription can also help in rethinking the writing practices of global trade in ways which suggest how capital's 'logic' might be reconceived.

Inscribing global trade

How did the Company's trade with the east coast of India work, and what roles was writing expected to play within it? Every year, in about December or January, a fleet of ships would be loaded with cargo. This was predominantly American bullion gathered in European markets, along with some English broadcloth. The voyage around the Cape of Good Hope took about eight months. On arrival, the cargo would be distributed among the various factories, the ships moving up and down the coast and sometimes further afield to trade Indian goods in the Indonesian archipelago. The bullion was coined into local currencies, and used to trade for cloth – cottons, silks and mixtures of the two – with substantial local merchants who organized production through systems of outworking. The Company also bought saltpetre, sugar, turmeric and cinnamon with which to lade the ships. In order to find good winds and a safe passage home the fleet had to be dispatched the following December or January. However, this only gave a short time in which to gather the return cargo, and any imminent deadline forced up prices in the spot markets. This made it necessary to use contracts with Indian traders and local systems of credit to help gather cargoes prior to the ships' arrival. On their return, the merchandise was sold at quarterly sales at East India House.²¹

In purely practical terms, the problems of co-ordination and organization were substantial ones. The Company sought to match, as profitably as possible, supply from India and demand in European markets, and needed to orchestrate the movements of their ships and cargoes accordingly. As part of attempts to achieve this, various forms of writing were required almost every step of the way. In the simplest cases, the Company required the labelling and listing of cargoes sent and their prices. In the absence of this information, on tickets tucked into bales of cloth, marks on bags of spices, and musters detailing whole cargoes, profits were rendered insecure.²² They were also threatened when it was overdone, with buyers wanting to open all the bales to see the differences in quality that the written words, numbers or symbols suggested.²³ There were also lengthy letters sent from London to India that gave orders for goods to be supplied and instructions for the deployment of shipping. In return came not only vessels full of merchandise, but boxes of documents including replies to these letters, requested

information, and copies of the accounts, letterbooks and diaries which detailed the factories' operations. Writing was a key technology in long-distance trade. It was difficult to co-ordinate profitably without it, its absence or disorder brought chaos, and it provided a means to shape the nature and functioning of that trade.

Yet both this trade and the inscriptions that tracked and shaped it did not simply develop and operate smoothly, particularly during the massive and chaotic expansion of the Company's business in the late 17th century. The Company's directors faced difficult questions over how they should organize their array of factories, and often had little effective control over their operation. These difficulties were exacerbated by disputes among Company employees and between the Directors and their servants in India resulting from their private trading. This was the trafficking in certain permitted goods within the Asian 'country trade', and often in partnership with the same Indian merchants who supplied the Company with cloth. It also involved Company servants at all levels illegitimately trading back to Europe and in commodities prohibited by the Company. It was via private trade, rather than through their salaries, that the Company's employees, including Streynsham Master, sought to make their Indian fortunes.²⁴ Consequently, the Court of Directors tried to reorganize how their business was run during this period. They made new rules on private trade. They ordered the subordination of the factories in the Bay of Bengal, and therefore all factories on the Coast and Bay, to Fort St George in 1661, and their separation out again (although only for three years) when William Hedges was sent out in 1681 to run the agency in the Bay.²⁵ They also attempted to regulate how these factories worked. In 1674 Major William Puckle was sent to investigate the Company's affairs.²⁶ More significantly, Streynsham Master arrived in 1676 as the new agent at the Fort, but was charged with travelling to all the subordinate factories to ensure their proper operation before assuming control from William Langhorn. Central to Master's work was attention to how writing and accounting were to be done. His changes were ones which, his 19th-century biographer noted, 'had a commanding influence on the public accounts of the English in India for a long time afterwards'.²⁷

I want to consider three forms of inscription that Streynsham Master sought to regulate. These are the factories' consultation books (or diaries); the account books which each of the factories also kept; and the letters which passed between the Court of Directors and the Company's servants in India. In each case it is demonstrated that the forms of writing adopted were actively shaped by the social, cultural and political relations within which they were written and read. In turn, it can also be shown that these modes of inscription, and the material geographies of their production, storage and consumption, were an integral part of making those social relations, and with them the economic and political practices of trade. Thus, consultation books worked to constitute what counted as legitimate decisions; factory accounts and the management of bookkeeping were part of the social and moral order of the factory; and letter writing established relations of authority and subordination via the rhetorics of respect. Understanding what Streynsham Master was doing, and how he was doing it, involves considering these modes of writing as cultural and material practices which make up relationships which structure power and exchange, or what are considered to be the

political and the economic. Inscriptions were constructed out of a cultural politics of collectivity, order and authority, and, in turn, structured those relationships into the working of global trade. In doing so, these ways of putting pen to paper both depended upon and shaped the organizational forms and spaces of the Company and the factory. In each case they tried to draw a boundary, or rather a series of boundaries, between the public world of the Company's trade and the private world of its servants' interests. This was a new conceptual geography that found material form in the factories' writing offices.

Consultation books and collective decisions

The first part of the Company's business to be considered is how decisions were made in the factories, and the role that their consultation books were to play in that. Questions of access to these books – their presence within a restricted public sphere of collective decision-making – were crucial to how effective factories were meant to function, and to what it meant to make a decision.

Decisions on all Company business were to be made by the head of the factory – the chief, agent or governor – acting in council. In the 1660s the council at the Fort might simply be selected by the agent 'as in your Judgements are best accomplished with abillities to doe us service'.²⁸ However, Streysham Master brought changes which defined council membership on the basis of appointment to specific positions – as chief, bookkeeper, secretary or warehousekeeper – and established rules of succession between the factories which bound their councils together. For example, on the death or removal of the second in council at Hugli, the most senior of the chiefs at Kassimbazar, Patna or Dacca was to take his place, being replaced by the third in council at Hugli, the fourth moving up to third, and being himself replaced by the senior merchant at the Fort. While agents in council were now able to suspend members for 'unfaithfulness or other great misdemeanour', all dismissals or appointments had to follow Master's rules and be ratified in London. Councils were not, even temporarily, to include those not entitled to sit, although they might gauge the opinion of the wider body of factors and merchants in specific cases.²⁹

Company policy was that councils were to operate through free and open debate. When Thomas Chambers took over as agent at Fort St George on the death of William Greenhill, the Company advised him 'that all matters bee debated and concluded of by Consulta[tion] and not as formerly singly by our Agent and such as he hath deputed, wch wee utterly dislike and will by noe meanes allow of in the future'.³⁰ Conclusions were to be reached by majority vote. Dissenters were not obliged to give their consent, although they were required to follow the majority decision, and they were encouraged to enter their reasons for disagreement. In the event of a stalemate, the chief had the casting vote.³¹ Agents felt, therefore, compelled to apologize and attempted to show general consent when external conditions such as war meant 'it was impossible to reduce all into formall consultations'.³² Master sought to routinize this even further by stipulating that there should be regular meetings at every factory – on Mondays and

Thursdays – with all members summoned at eight in the morning by the secretary, and absences noted.³³

The Company's aim was simple. They sought to ensure by debate, in imitation of their own practice, that corporate interests were paramount. The directors saw the greatest threat to their profits to lie in the power of the agent or chief, and his own private interests. The language that was used, both in England and India, was familiar from 17th-century political debates about the relationship between king and parliament.³⁴ Thus, despite the advice given him on taking office, there were complaints from the Fort that Chambers' rule meant 'liveing under the Arbitrary governemete of One Man, which will not advise with his Councill in matters which concerne the gouvernemente of yo^r honour's towne', and fears that the council might be overawed by fear or respect into relinquishing their 'free vote'.³⁵ In the same vein, Richard Mohun at Masulipatnam was presented by his accusers as a chief whose 'imperious carriage soe overawes the Hono^{ble} Comp^{as} people there that they are ready to Signe any thing he shall tender to them', and one, it was suspected, who 'has threatened to Ruin some of them: when displeased, thereby to make them Submitt to his arbitrary Power'.³⁶

Consultation was the defence against this abuse of authority, and its recording in writing was, therefore, a matter of great importance. In the mid-1670s the Company had Master require of their factories that 'All Transactions of buying and selling and all other Our Affaires are to be resolved and concluded in Councell, to w^{ch} purpose you are to keepe dayly or frequent consultations and to take care that the Secretary do dayly and truely register all things in the Booke of Consultations'.³⁷ Entries were to be made whether decisions had been arrived at or not, and the books were to be given marginal notes and an index for future reference. Moreover, the consultation entries, as well as any amendments and the copies of the books made for dispatch to London, had to be signed by all council members to show their consent.³⁸

There was, therefore, a required format for these records. In 1679, 'that none may be to Seeke how to perform what is now apoint'd', Streymsbam Master sent the factory at Hugli 'Extracts of the forme practised by our selves here in Entering these things in our Consultation booke . . . w^{ch} we recommend to your observation'. Later that year Hugli's council also received from London copies of the Madapollam consultation books, judged 'agreeable to y^t methode . . . to w^{ch} wee require your conformity'. In 1681, they passed them on to all the subordinate factories for their 'imitation'.³⁹ Albeit slowly, uniformity was spread.

The consultation books also worked within a hierarchy of examination and accountability. In the late 1650s consultation books were sent annually from the subordinate factories to the Fort, who examined them, packed them with their own and sent them to London.⁴⁰ From 1676, on Master's orders, they were to be copied and sent monthly from the subordinate factories to Hugli or Masulipatnam, and twice annually, in May and November, from there to Fort St. George for annual dispatch to London.⁴¹ This allowed the decisions made to be more closely scrutinized. Consultation books were used within the factories to inform future practice on the basis of past decisions. Entries from them might also be copied and sent as orders to subordinate factories. They were certainly read carefully by Puckle and Master as part of their factory

reorganizations. Finally, the Company's requirement that they be used as the place for justifying decisions which contravened Company orders meant that those returned to London became the basis for the directors' demands for action over events occurring in India two or three years previously.⁴² All these issues of keeping, signing and sending consultation books in the proper way and at the proper time became points of contention between those who kept the books and those further up the hierarchy to whom they were sent for scrutiny.⁴³

This was not simply a practical matter. It was an issue of Company politics. The consultation books did not just record decisions for consideration in another place or time, they also constituted certain otherwise indeterminate actions, events, forms of words and modes of social practice as decisions, assigning as they did so responsibility and authority. Therefore, these books acted as the guarantee, within each factory and elsewhere, of the decision-making process. They guaranteed decisions as emanating from the legitimate social practice of the chief's consultation in council. This, however, depended upon their publicity since consultation books could only be such a guarantee if they and other writings were made available to the appropriate Company servants. These books had to belong to the factory and not be the property of any individual. They were, the Company stipulated through Streynsham Master, 'not to be carried away upon the remove of the Cheife', but handed over to his successor.⁴⁴ Moreover, the Company's 'Marchants, Factors, Writers & Apprentizes' were 'not to be debarred or kept from y^e sight of Our Bookes and affaires'. This served several purposes. First, the books were there 'to trayne them up'. Second, it meant that other employees could more easily take over the running of the factory in case of sudden death. Finally, and most importantly, it was necessary for free debate and voting in council that all 'writeings bee at all times Communicated, & left to y^e publique view of y^e Counsell'.⁴⁵ Consequently, Thomas Chambers was chastised in 1662 for keeping such information from his council. As the Company noted, 'to which practice wee can give no other construction then that it hath very much tended to our prejudice, for faire and honest dealings need not Shunn the light'. The books were to act as the guarantee and check against those chiefs who might act 'arbitrarily and absolutely' against the Company's interests.⁴⁶

The consultation books, as a vital part of the process of making legitimate decisions and of guaranteeing the Company's interests, were to be kept public. This was, however, what might be called, following Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's discussion of knowledge-making in the Royal Society of the 1660s, a 'restricted public space'.⁴⁷ The intention was never that the books should simply be open to all. Having them accessible within the limits of the council – who both witnessed the books with their signatures, and had their authority and decision-making capacity established by them as a record – was a necessary insurance against the private interests of each one of them, particularly the chief who held a power that might be abused. The consultation books, therefore, sketched a particular line between the 'public' and the 'private' in Company decision-making.

There were, however, differences over how consultation should be done. These differences raised important political questions about the authority accorded to those

who ran the factories and the discretion they had to act as they saw fit. William Puckle, Streynsham Master and those who scrutinized the books in London called into question the way William Langhorn ran his consultations at Fort St George. There were complaints that there were no 'frequent Stated times', and they did not 'then sitt & orderly & fairely debate'.⁴⁸ Master was impatient to replace Langhorn as agent, and keen to suggest that he often acted without consultation. He reported to London that 'when y^e Councill did meet there was nothing done regularly, but one walked one way & another walked another way in y^e Roome, when y^e busyness was moved, w^{ch} was spoken to but indifferently, afterwards [Langhorn] himsef drawes up in writeing what he thinks fit, & all the Councell signe it'.⁴⁹ However, Langhorn and his council defended themselves by setting out a model of consultation that offered the positive version of Master and Puckle's accounts of disorder and arbitrariness. Here Langhorn's practice was presented as 'rather encouraging and entreating us of Councell clearely to deliver our minds . . . then any wayes over awing of the rest'. It was a collective rather than authoritarian epistemology that involved a socialized hermeneutics, a division of intellectual and administrative labour, and a sting in the tail for those who prioritized Company hierarchy over effective factories:

[M]atter of moment and difficulty requiring Consultation, appearing to him as some solid substance beyond the circuit or penetration of the Eye at once, and w^{ch} a single man attempting though by degrees shall loose as fast as he changes aspects; But w^{ch} by multitudes of Councello^{rs} taken in parts; Collation and discourse shall search & sift out every scruple. It has ever been commendable to use our own judgem^{ts} yet best when examined and tried (according to the Owners discretion) by that of others. But to subject every trivial matter to these formalities, were to turne either business or Servants into ridicule.

As Langhorn concluded, 'Neither is all business of a like nature. Playn cases requiring little more than their hearing, matters of difficulty their debate, and publick transactions their formallities At his [Puckle's] trifling Rate the Hono^{ble} Comp^a had need have two Agents and Councells, the one to consult the other to act'.⁵⁰

For Master, Puckle, Langhorn and the Company, the shared acceptance of the principle of consultation in council, and its necessary recording in the consultation books, still raised questions of the proper authority of the agent or chief within the hierarchy of the factory – what was his relation to his subordinates to be? – and of the discretion allowable to chief and council in relation to the Company's orders. These two issues also shaped and were shaped by the inscriptions through which orderly factories and orders for factors were made and guaranteed: accounting and letters.

Accounts and the social order of the factory

Streynsham Master went to settle the factories of the Coast and Bay with two sets of printed orders made in 1667 and sent to India, but which seemed to have fallen into disuse. These covered, first, 'y^e Manadgement of Our Affaires and keeping Our Bookes' and, second, 'Certain orders and rules for promoting of sobriety and piety'.⁵¹ Through

them the Company sought to intervene in how the business of each factory was conducted, and in the personal lives of its servants. Considering how accounting was done can demonstrate that the practice of bookkeeping and the social and moral order of the factory were connected through ideas of hierarchy and the role of the chief or agent.

Master's prime role, and his first enthusiasm, was putting the accounts in order. His two journeys around the factories involved extensive practical work balancing books which were in a confused and disorderly state, and setting out ways of keeping them in the future. This reform of accounting procedures was based on the 'plaine & cleare Method' he had devised at Surat in the 1660s, and which he had already used in 1668 to reorganize the factories at Karwar and Calicut.⁵² Extending those methods to the chaotic accounts of the Coast and Bay was based on a few simple principles.⁵³ The first was uniformity across the different factories. As those in charge at Fort St George put it to the Hugli factory some years later, the Surat method was 'the forme w^{ch} the Hono^{ble} Company have aproved & ordered to be observed . . . and not any one to follow his own fancy for should that be allowed of there would be every year as many different wayes of keeping acco^{ts} as there are Men and books, w^{ch} ought not to be in the Hono^{ble} Companys business and therefore they have prescribed one set forme . . .'.⁵⁴ The second principle was what might be called legibility. This was not simply a matter of whether the books could be read, but of shaping bookkeeping practices so that the accounts made visible what the Company wanted to be able to see.⁵⁵ This was particularly important in London, where the accounts were, with all their faults, the most complete and reliable picture of Company trade in India. As ideas of 'inscription' suggest, accountancy does not simply mirror pre-existing economic practices, representing them more or less well. Accounts should be understood to constitute economic practice through modes of inscription and analysis, enabling new forms of intervention that would not otherwise be possible.⁵⁶

Streysham Master's reforms of accounting aimed to change how Company trade could be understood by introducing new ways in which places and commodities, and their relative profitability, could be made visible and legible, and therefore the basis for action. Each factory was to have its own accounts. For each of them Master's bookkeeping practice required the itemization of all trading and packing costs and their proportional allocation to each commodity. All factory charges were to be detailed and presented in annual tables to 'be more readily compared wth y^e factory bookes'; and, when balanced, the overall amounts on the debit and credit sides were to be subdivided to show what was fixed capital, what lay as bad debts, goods as yet unsold or money advanced or borrowed at interest by the factors – so that 'business [could be] directed and Governed accordingly'.⁵⁷ More significantly, Master proposed changing the date on which all the accounts were to be balanced from the end of November to the end of April: 'For [30 November] . . . is almost in the midst of the season for Europe shipping, and so divides one yeares business into two paire of bookes [each pair a Journal and Ledger]: . . . And soe, againe, part of two yeares business comes in one paire of bookes . . . Thus confusedly comes one yeares returnes to be opposed to the following yeares receipts . . .'. As he put it, the new system 'will certainly comprehend

one shippings business . . .'. It would also reveal the relationship between charges and investments, and allow the books to be balanced at a quieter time for the bookkeepers.⁵⁸

The final principle was that the accounts should be able to be combined within each factory and across the hierarchical system of factories. This was aided by the changes already discussed, such as the uniform method and the single date for balancing the books. In addition, the Company's rating of the pagoda at 9s and the rupee at 2s 3d for the purposes of bookkeeping allowed accounts to be combined and compared even in the face of regionally and temporally differentiated exchange rates.⁵⁹ Master's rules also specified how books should be continued from one year to the next, and how, in each factory, the accounts of the warehousekeeper, the steward and the purser should be combined into the general books.⁶⁰ Most importantly, he aimed to establish a nested hierarchy of accounts that would include all the general accounts of all the factories of the Coast and Bay into one system of accounts whose balances and differentiations would both reveal the geography of Company trade and account for all investments and returns within a single bookkeeping system. So, just as they sent them the goods and received from them the bullion, the accounts of all the subordinate factories in the Bay would be cleared into – and therefore 'inferior' to – the accounts at Hugli, which was to occupy the same position in relation to Fort St George's accounts. In theory, any parcel of goods or money could be traced through the books as it moved through the factory system, changing hands and changing form as it did so. This arrangement meant that adjustments to the inferior factories' accounts were done on the basis of those of the superior, but not vice versa. However, it also meant that 'superior' factories had to wait for the accounts of 'inferior' ones before their books could be closed. The aim and the problem were succinctly stated in a letter from the Fort to the Bay in 1681:

Your Bookes are so long coming to us y^t wee are forced to shutt up ours wthout them for it is very inconvenient to keep them open till y^e ships come when wee are so full of other businesse and wee must tell you it is a great neglect in y^e Inland factoryes not to send you theirs for y^t Bookes coming wthout theirs included will signify no more than y^e Acc^t Currant now Receiveld from you for as your Bookes are to Include all y^e Subordinate factoryes acc^{ts} so ours must take in y^{rs} and theirs y^t so y^e Comp^a may see their whole charges and Proffitt both upon y^e Coast and Bay and therefore a defect herein tends to nothing but confusion . . .⁶¹

The whole system depended, of course, upon the books being kept properly at each factory. It was intended that any defects would be sorted out by making bookkeepers responsible for their books, along with the chiefs who were named in their titles and also had to sign them. Penalties were instituted, to be enforced by the agent at the Fort, for failing to balance and send the accounts promptly.⁶² Overall, the aim was to ensure that London annually received a uniform, legible and combined set of accounts revealing the nature of the Indian trade.

In London, the accounts were part of decision-making over orders and investments. They were also scrutinized by the auditor and Company accountant for unwarranted charges, mistakes, frauds and shoddy bookkeeping. These problems then had to be

rectified in India, often several years after they had first been committed to paper.⁶³ Keeping the books was inseparable from doing business in India, and reading the books in London was an important part of adjusting the business that was done, even if the rhetoric of control was often more significant than the reality. As a result, 'Counting-house worke' judged 'confus'd irregular and disorderly' was generally attributed to badly run factories, 'to loose and ill methods and habits w^{ch} o^r Servants there had contracted by long Sloth, carelessness and neglect'.⁶⁴ This drew on a hard-won set of metaphorical and material connections between balanced accounts, merchants' fidelity and social order.⁶⁵ It meant that William Puckle and Streynsham Master had to concern themselves both with how the books were kept and with problems of moral and social order in the Company's factories.

Captain Puckle's instructions sent him to examine whether the Company's orders on religious duties were being followed in Masulipatnam and to discover the 'refractory', 'idle, and debauched', as well as to regulate the business there.⁶⁶ One of Master's tasks was to ensure that the so-called 'Company Commandements' (there being ten of them) for 'Christian and sober Comportment' were displayed publicly and followed in each factory.⁶⁷ As a result of his investigations Puckle suggested that the young men at Masulipatnam, particularly the writers who spent all day copying the books, might be put under a new regime which would discipline them for absences from prayers, work, the factory, their chambers after ten in the evening, or for frequenting punch houses and for beating servants. Master, following Langhorn's rules for the Fort, sought to regulate the keeping and use of punch and arrack houses, and to enforce fines for profanity, blasphemy, lying, gambling, drunkenness, absence from prayers, adultery, fornication and uncleanness in all factories. He also established the first Anglican church in India.⁶⁸

This Christian moral order was combined with a strongly hierarchical sense of social order. At Masulipatnam, Captain Puckle found that the Company's replacement of Richard Mohun by four equal commissioners was causing more problems than it was solving. There were 'great contests' among the commissioners and, as a result, the young writers were drinking in their rooms, blaspheming and 'declaring themselves for parties, & y^t they are not obliged to obey y^e order of any one Com^r when another Com^r differs from him'.⁶⁹ His remedy was to re-establish the hierarchy of chief and council, the placing of each writer under a member of the council, and the removal of status symbols – native footmen and umbrella carriers – which the lesser employees had assumed in contravention of the practice at the Fort.⁷⁰ Yet this hierarchy was to be one which also encouraged progression. Puckle recommended that 'the order for succession be strictly observed, chiefship being the hopes, aymes, & encouragem^t of all subordinate'.⁷¹ Master was later sent out with the new rules for succession which would move able employees around the factory councils and up the hierarchy, and with a strict grading of positions – apprentice, writer, factor, merchant, senior merchant – via which a Company servant would progress, learning the job from the bottom up, from copying the books to running a factory. Those already in India were to be reassured that they would be rewarded on merit, and that none would be sent out from England and put in places above them.⁷²

Of course things were never so harmonious. The vicissitudes of rise and fall in the hierarchy, and the machinations of personal rivalries and private trade, caused Langhorn to comment on the 'emulation envy & backbiting so much in use . . . that we tax poore Machiavelly'.⁷³ Yet it was this idea of moral order, hierarchy, progression and tutelage that was meant to structure the world of the factory and its business. These small groups of Europeans – Fort St George, the largest, counting only about 25 Company servants from writers upwards – were, ideally, to live together in the factory. This was, as contemporary representations show, understood as an enclosed world, even if it was, in reality, a highly permeable one (Figure 3).⁷⁴ Most significantly, all employees were to eat together at a 'publicque table' that was strictly organized by position in the factory.⁷⁵ At the head was the agent, or chief, who was expected to be given due respect, and to act in a way that required it.⁷⁶ His position was crucial. As William Langhorn put it, 'when the chief in place and power, who is at the head & heart of all, is as he ought to be, the whole body can hardly be out of tune, and so the contrary'.⁷⁷ At the other end, the writers were to be sat at the same table for the 'more orderly Government of the Youthes . . .'. Doing so would give them 'So good an example and preventing them from keeping ill Company', since they might otherwise 'stragle into Punch howses & other inconvenient places'.⁷⁸ There were, however, tensions here between the claims of an ordered hierarchy and the maintenance of social position and authority. Despite what his views on being chief may have suggested, Langhorn was also concerned that his status might be damaged by being 'tyed to sitt like a pedant amongst his boyes'.⁷⁹ In censuring him for this, Master was clear that his rival's exclusion of the writers from the factory's public table 'was y^e Direct way to ruine all y^e young men & consequently the Companys busynes, by keeping their Factors in Ignorance'.⁸⁰

These connections between the Company's business and its servants' morals turned on the construction of a hierarchical social order which made the personal lives of the Company's employees an important part of the construction of a set of 'public' arrangements in the factory built upon notions of hierarchy, authority and respect. As with the consultation books, the threat to the orderly and profitable conduct of the Company's business, both disclosed by the accounts and made possible through them, came from illegitimate private action. The integrity of the accounts was threatened by Company servants' illegal private trade, by undue reliance on the testimony of Indian merchants with their own interests at heart, and by many forms of inexperience, carelessness and trickery.⁸¹ The accounts were read for signs of these disturbances of factory practice in ways that made auditing the books and a moral accountancy of employees' lives inseparable. The construction of a uniform, legible and interlocking system of accounting both served the ends of business and better revealed differences and discrepancies that then had to be accounted for in economic, political or moral terms. Notably, Streymsbam Master also went to India to deliver the Company's new and, as they saw it, more indulgent rules on private trade. What came with this recognition, however, was a desire for a clearer line between Company business and the private dealings that often involved the same merchandise and the same Indian merchants (and, the Directors suspected, the same capital). Consequently, the

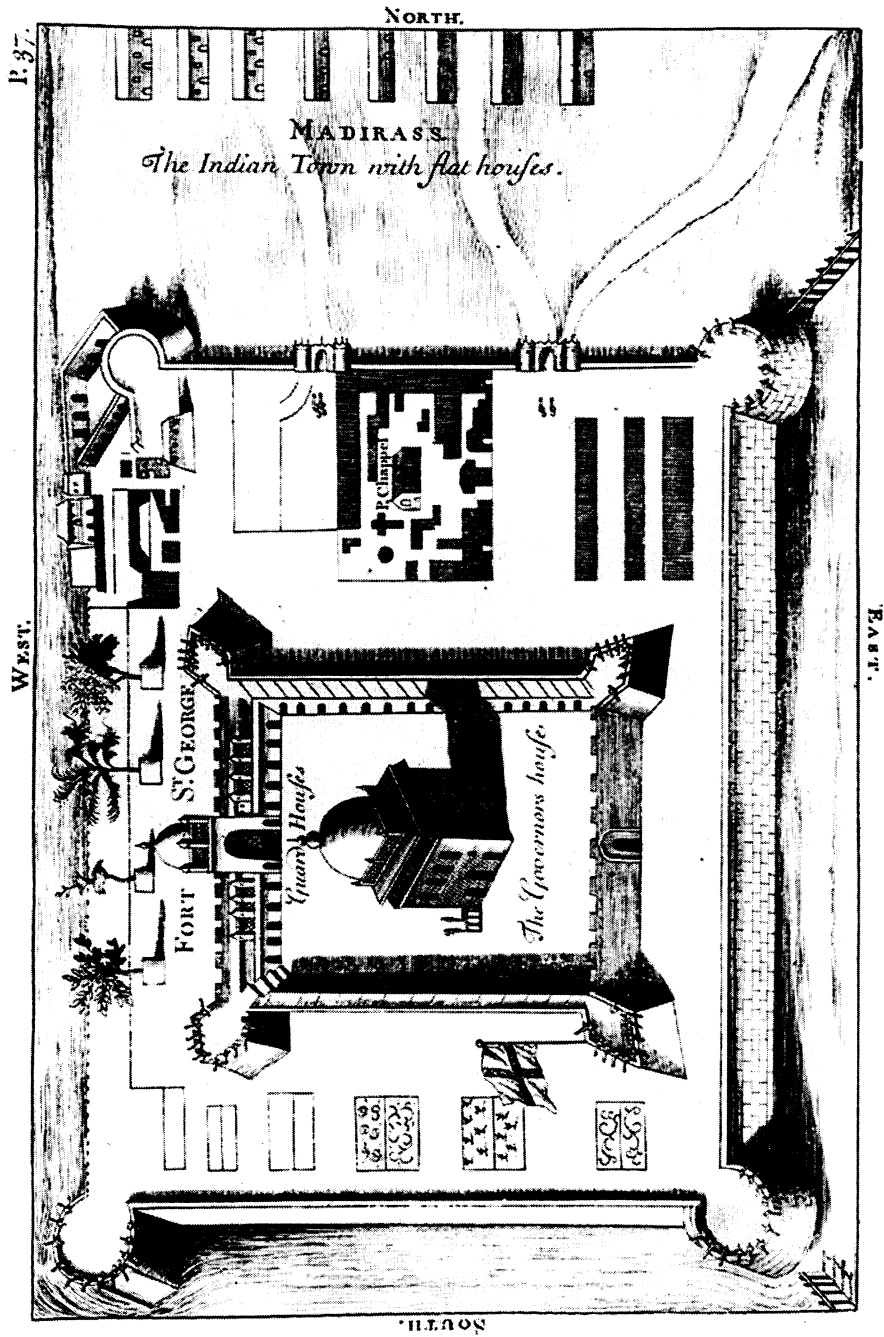


FIGURE 3 Fort St George in the late 17th century. (From J. Fryer, *A new account of East-India and Persia* (London, 1698). By permission of the British Library: 567.i.20.)

Company also demanded the 'punctuall observance' of their oft-neglected order to keep a full register of private trade.⁸² Ideally, when properly kept by appropriately trained and disciplined Company servants, the accounts would be a product of the public social order of the factory and bear no trace of illegitimate private concerns. These notions also shaped the ways in which the Company in London and its servants in India wrote to each other and read the letters they received.

Letters, orders and the rhetoric of respect

Communication between London and Fort St George was based on an annual letter that went out with the fleet, and a reply that came back with the cargo. However, these general letters were also supplemented by other letters, on average about five a year, which were sent on ships to other Indian ports or overland. This was less secure, but served as some insurance if the fleet was delayed or the letter did not get through. Once on the coast, under Master's instructions, a 'good Correspondence' between the factories was to be ensured by having those at the Fort peruse the Company's letters to the Bay before sending them on with any supplementary advice and orders.⁸³ Masulipatnam simply received instructions from the Fort. Replies from both places to the Company came back to the Fort, for comments to be added, prior to sending them back to London. They would arrive in the capital some time after the next letter had been sent to begin the process again.

The letters from London contained a range of material. They detailed, or amended, the orders for cloth and other goods, stating the types, colours, quality and lengths required, often with patterns, and the prices that should be paid based on information from sales. They were full of information about the state of the market.⁸⁴ This meant detailed commentary on the previous year's cargo, what was too short, too rough or the wrong colour; angrily pointing out what had been delivered that was not what had been ordered. They identified what was damaged en route, and, along with information about European wars, their orders for how business should be conducted, allocating or reallocating positions, ruling on suspensions and appointments, making rules for the paperwork, and passing comment on the performance of their employees. The responses from India sought to answer their queries; question or confirm instructions and orders; justify controversial decisions; and pose their own questions about the business. They were also required to provide information on supply, detailing new goods that the Company might find a market for; on demand, particularly for the woollen cloth the Company was compelled to export; and on the machinations of local rulers and European competitors.

In both cases the letters were written in a particular way. They were composites put together by a range of people. Those from London were compiled by the Committee of Writing Letters from materials provided by other committees – on shipping, treasury, or the Coast and Bay.⁸⁵ At Fort St George, they were read and debated section by section by the agent and council over a matter of months, and replies were similarly composed, read, amended and signed collectively. When these long replies reached London they

were taken apart and the elements allocated to the appropriate committees for consideration. This structure of communication produced a particular format. For clarity, the Company insisted that the letters state the date and location they had been sent from, when letters were last sent (often enclosing copies), which ships had recently arrived, and which letters were the ones being answered. More specifically, as with the consultation books, they required that the letters be signed by all the council, and by none that were not.⁸⁶ In the 1670s they began to insist that to 'facillitate your Correspondence' the Fort and Bay must 'answer y^e Severall Paragraphs as they lye in Order', numbering them for ease of reference.⁸⁷ This revealed some of the tensions built into the relations of authority that the letters made possible across the oceanic space between London and Fort St George. William Langhorn's response to a system that was clearly for the convenience of the committees in London, rather than the councils in India, was heavy with sarcasm: 'We have confined ourselves to your own rules of answering the paragraphs in your letters in order as they ly except N^o 102; our practice formerly being to extract and reduce all business of a like nature into method, for the more compendious way of replying, exacter coherence, and curranter revisall; but we shall allwaies be glad to learne.'⁸⁸

Tellingly, this innovation was enthusiastically adopted by Streyntsham Master as part of his welding of the factories into a single system through their paperwork. This was also pursued through the archiving of the letters in registers. Of course, mercantile practice had meant that these registers had always been kept in the factories. However, under Master, these letterbooks were given titles, marginal notes and indexes, and were to 'be all bound up handsomely, and covered with leather'.⁸⁹ They were to be closed at the end of November to be sent home on the fleet, as well as archived at each level, by having subordinate factories send copies of their letters to each other to Hugli, to have Hugli send two copies of all volumes of letters sent and received to the Fort; and the Fort to send one of these and copies of all its letters to London.⁹⁰

There were, of course, substantial problems with this mode of communication. Those in Hugli, Fort St George and London complained of letters delayed, mislaid or not sent, and the gap between delivery and receipt could make orders irrelevant or troublesome.⁹¹ The official correspondence between the directors and the factories also had as its constant shadow an extensive network of private communication, both within India and between India and London. This often used the same modes of conveyance, but sidestepped and disrupted the official channels to organize private trade and patronage systems, and was used to spread malicious gossip and to denounce other Company servants.⁹² Finally, particularly for those in London, there never seemed to be enough information, or on the right subjects. In part, the Company's Directors saw this as a problem of how those in India read. In 1672, they commented on both the councils of the Fort and the Bay, that 'neither they nor you . . . seeme to lay our Letters before you, when you goe to give answer unto them, w^{ch} wee require in the future to be amended'.⁹³ Yet it was also a problem with how they wrote. As it was stated in 1661,

Our Letters from y^e Coast & Bay . . . are full of obscure passages . . . [T]hey tell us all is subject to y^e greate Kinge, & all at peace in y^e Bay, but say not whoe y^e greate King is, nor on what termes y^e peace is

concluded, as if because they know those things, it necessarily followes y^t wee must alsoe, though at soe greate a distance. Wee would have you advise them, & to take notice of it your selves, y^t wee shall expect punctuall & full advices of all passages, & in such language as may be under stood.⁹⁴

These matters of reading and writing were a particular problem when it came to giving orders. In theory it was simple. Orders made in London had to be followed at the Fort and down the hierarchy to the subordinate factories. Each level should expect compliance from those below on the basis of the orders from London.⁹⁵ By the mid-1670s, however, this hierarchy had become dislocated. William Langhorn noted that 'the now contemned authority of the Agency . . . is little better than laughed at, and despised' both at Masulipatnam and Hugli, 'thereby unravelling the whole Oeconomy of the Hono^{ble} Comp^{as} affaires in India'.⁹⁶ Moreover, the distances involved, and the necessity of putting orders into practice in uncertain and changing conditions, introduced problems of interpretation. Orders could not, somehow, be separated from the way that they were written and from the changing contexts in which those words were read. It was clear, for example, that there were different versions of the same situation in Langhorn's complaint that the Company was always 'taking all things in the worst sense'.⁹⁷ This meant that matters could be made better or worse by the way orders were composed. Master argued that, under Langhorn, 'There hath noe regard been to keep them [the subordinate factories] in any order or quiett, . . . soe that all his time they have been in incessant broyles and undetermined differences by many very obscure orders and directions'.⁹⁸ Captain Puckle, who had been sent to determine if orders were being followed at Masulipatnam, recommended 'That all advices and orders . . . be in full and plaine termes, not dubious and uncertaine to be understood, w^{ch} hath sometime occasioned divisions amongst the Com^{ts} as to their opinions'.⁹⁹ Plainness was, indeed, the order of the day. The Company's insistence on 'positive orders in plaine words' chimed with John Hill's instruction in his *Young secretary's guide* (1689) that letters to factors 'ought to be no more than the plain sense of the Fact'.¹⁰⁰ Yet, along with continuing differences over the interpretation of the facts, the Company also had to deal with the question of discretion.

The trade with India could not operate effectively only on the basis of orders from London. Company servants in all the factories had to be empowered to act in response to specific local economic, political and environmental conditions where Company orders were nonexistent, unclear or erroneous.¹⁰¹ The directors needed the factories to assert this discretion where following orders would be detrimental to their interests, but they could not just let the factories act as they wanted.¹⁰² This was a recipe for conflict. As Langhorn put it, 'In one breath you bid us use our judgem^{ts}, & disapprove the use'.¹⁰³

These conflicts were played out in the Company's letters as contests over and in the language of respect. Langhorn diagnosed the problem in 1676: 'The shortnes of your orders, in the most important points of your business', and the lack of discretion and trust given to servants, 'makes all sides wary' and 'where the Treack is not thouroughly beaten, do either keepe to orders or tarry for them'.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, as Master presented his enemy, he was himself notorious for not taking any initiative and simply waiting to be told what to do.¹⁰⁵ Langhorn, for his part, portrayed the agent's position as all

responsibility with no reward or respect from on high, and argued with the directors that 'one would think it should no less concern you that they be well satisfied of your good meaning than you of theirs'.¹⁰⁶

The Company was certainly keen on the language of respect. For them, however, it only ran in one direction: towards London. Master, on his travels around the subordinate factories, instructed them 'That the Letters and advices to the Honourable Company may be adressed with a becomeing respect, as becomes servants to their Masters, They are always to be wrote in a Submissive stile and Directed, "To the Honourable Governour and Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies"'.¹⁰⁷ The Company's definition of misdemeanour included not only refusing to obey orders but also 'bad language' to superiors.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the Company's responses to Langhorn and, later, to Master's letters were positively vitriolic. It is clear that it was as much bad language as bad actions that were at stake. Langhorn was censured for his 'higher Stile', 'unhandsome & disrespectful passages', 'indecent language' and 'haughty vaine unmannerly expressions', and was told to 'manage your pen with more respect'.¹⁰⁹ Master's sin was pride, wallowing in the 'vaine ostentatious pomp of India' and thinking himself 'too good or too bigg'.¹¹⁰ He was reminded that his 'stile' of writing the relationship between London and the Fort was in error, 'wee having power without your leaving it to us'. And if the Company punned against him on his dismissal, arguing that 'we have at least the same power in our own affairs as every Master hath in his own family', it was because he had been guilty of misusing one of their own terms: 'you say you crave our pardon for yo^r plainnesse . . . [But] you betray your own weaknesse as well as your pride . . . in supposing that wee cannot judge betweene plainness and Insolence . . .'.¹¹¹

The Company in London had, therefore, a way of reading that combined its concerns with excessive factory costs, following orders and giving respect. Each, as evidenced in a letter, might be a sign of the others. As they put it in 1681, 'it is our Constant Maxim grounded upon a Long experience, that a wastefull haughty or prodigall person, can never be a good Servant for us, Let him be otherwise never so Crafty plausible or methodicall'. They concluded, 'We have seldome observed such peremptorines in Servants, but at length we find it accompanied with infidelity'.¹¹² Yet, as with all such readings, these conclusions were a product of the interpretative community of readers, rather than simply being inherent in the texts themselves. The directors' interests cohered around the profitability of their collective concerns in India, but diverged on how or by whom that would be best achieved, and on their own private interests. While any agent's eventual fall from grace was, perhaps, inevitable, when and how that came about was a matter of managing the politics of patronage in the Court of Directors and other places, and of shaping the process of reading. In Streysham Master's case, his kinsman Sir James Oxenden kept him informed of the factions among the Company's directors, and of 'the constant applications wee made to maintaine you in your designed and appointed Station . . .'. This involved not only attendance and argument every time Master's case had to be put, and Langhorn's denied, but ensuring that the opposition's attempts to enrol King Charles II on their side were countered. Oxenden had to have eyes everywhere. As he told Master, 'It was my fortune to be att

Court when our Gouvenor and Deputy were sent for by the King, and seeing Cooke in the long Gallery I suspected some Contrivance against you.' Writing and reading were crucial here. Master's long memorial on the new factory regulations was 'accounted very laborious and judicious'. It helped Oxenden 'to infuse an Esteem into y^e Dissenters', while simultaneously representing written charges against Master made by Joseph Arnold, one of the Commissioners at Masulipatnam, as 'Impertinent nonsensical and malicious', convincing others that they were 'very idle and the effect of an overheated braine' caused by Arnold's 'drinking and debauchery'. Other writings were dealt with more privately. Oxenden was invited to dinner by 'mr Brittain and Natt Scotton', whom he felt had offered Master an affront over Arnold's accusations. The purpose was 'to reason the Case & show mee y^r Letters'. Some missives, however, were for sympathetic eyes only. Oxenden informed Master that he had shown the postscript of his letter, relating a dispute with Langhorn, 'to some of our Friends . . . w^{ch} they liked very well and advised me as you did to communicate it to few Persons'. In all of this there was a salutary lesson from the decline of Gerald Aungier, former Governor at Bombay. His fall from favour was hastened by writing to at least four others that he wished them alone to be his successor. As Oxenden put it, 'If these persons to whom he had wrott had lived in Several Nations his Artifice might probably have been concealed, but they have all mett together and show their Letters to one another and some of the Company and despise him as the greatest Dissembler in nature.'¹¹³

It was clear, therefore, that reading and writing needed careful management. Letters sent between London and Fort St George contained much more than orders for cloth and details of new products and markets. Their language, and the deployment of the rhetorics of respect, was also the making and management of relations of authority, submission and discretion. Orders were not simple matters of fact, but questions of interpretation. It mattered who put pen to paper and how. Once again, the ways these letters were written, and particularly how they were read by the Company's directors, inscribed a line, albeit a flexible one, between appropriate Company service – a public realm of duty, deference and fidelity – and a private sphere which the directors suspected was shaped by illegitimate interests, dissembling politicking, and the sins of sloth, pride and vanity. They scrutinized the letters they received for signs that the line had been crossed, and argued over and acted on their interpretations.

Conclusion

I have argued that understanding writing and accounting as crucial technologies for making global trade means understanding them as the practical means for running factories, communicating at a distance, integrating supply and demand and controlling subordinates. But, like all technologies, they are more than just mechanisms that get things done. They are more than that because they are made from an array of elements which bring with them particular relationships between power, knowledge and the people who deploy them. Consultation books carried with them notions of collective decision-making within a restricted public sphere; accounting was built within ideas of

moral and social order; and letters to and from India deployed the languages of respect and disrespect. From these 'cultural' elements, political and economic relationships were made. Indeed, that is the second reason why they are more than simple mechanisms. They did not just represent or record the decisions, flows of goods and money, and orders that made up this branch of global trade, they actively made them. Consultation books were required to establish what could be taken to be decisions; accounting practices made the recognition of profitable exchange a possibility; and the Company's letter books constituted what forms of authority were permissible. This made writing important. Company officials at all levels, particularly Streynsham Master, attempted to control the responsibility for documents; the construction and use of archives; the formats of writing; the ways in which written material was produced; how documents should be read and by whom; their content, but also their style. Doing so meant that relationships constructed around and through these inscriptions, and actions that could be performed on and with inscriptions, shaped the world of the factory in India. The chief and council's negotiations of collectivity and authority were performed in and through the consultation books. The knowledge order of accountancy included the moral and social order of the factory. And questions of power and discretion were battled out in the numbered paragraphs of the Company's letters. Collective decisions, mercantile civility and legitimate authority did not precede writing and get reported or represented by it. Instead, they were made through the practices of writing.

Each of these forms of writing and accounting was important in that it shaped the Company's organizational form. New ways of writing minutes, accounts and letters endeavoured to draw a line between the public world of the Company's business and the private interests and failings of its employees. Consultation books were to be public, to guarantee decision-making in the interests of the Company. The accounts were, like the 'publique table', to be part of an ordered moral and social world, rather than shaped by what the directors saw as their employees' laziness, incompetence or venality. The Company's letters were also to ensure that the subordinates in India did not step out of their public role and pursue their private agendas. One key means of trying to guarantee all this –and of course it could never be finally guaranteed –was the construction and control of a particular space within the factories: the writing offices.

These offices were to be a restricted public space that could secure the integrity of the written documents through a combination of openness and closure. It was the 'laying up' of the books in an office for authorized viewing that was the guarantee of their public nature, and the absence of such a space was a sure sign of mismanagement.¹¹⁴ It also worked to connect the social order of the factory with orderly bookkeeping. For Puckle, one problem at Masulipatnam was that the 'writers & Accomptants have alwayes used to mannage their Acc^{ts} & do their writing worke in their respective Chambers, by reason whereof some have been negligent in their Duty, & many books & Papers of y^e Hono^{ble} Comp^{as} concerns have been lost . . .'. His solution was that 'A Roome in y^e Factory house is prepared & . . . all Bookes, Letters, Papers &c. are orderly disposed therein . . . And y^e Accomptants and writers required to attend dayly & dispatch their worke therein'. Each would have a desk, and 'the Chiefe will dayly give directions & inspect y^r doings having a seat prepared for him'.¹¹⁵ Indeed, despite the

cost, the Court of Directors supported this, ordering that each factory should have a writing office where 'all our bookes and papers may be orderly kept & that none be carried out to any private house or lodging, but that all busines may be dispatched there'.¹¹⁶ This chimed with Master's previous attempt to establish offices at the Fort and Hugli, and his tour of the subordinate factories included the repetition in each place of the same order:

In every one of the Subordinate Factoryes there shall be a handsome convenient roome, large, light and well scituated, near the Chief and Seconds lodgings, which shall be sett apart for the office, and never diverted from that use, In which roome shall be placed desks or tables to write upon, and presses with locks and keys, wherein the Registers of the letters, the Accompts, and all other writings of the Factory shall be locked up and kept, which, upon the Remove of the Chief, are to be delivered over by a Roll or List to the succeeding Chiefs, that none may be imbezled.¹¹⁷

The aim was to construct a controlled space for writing and calculation which would seek to ensure the accessibility of the books, the orderly conduct of accountancy, the absence of the selfish interests of factory chiefs, and all that depended upon that. Understanding this specific and small-scale geography of inscription as an ordering of the relationships between power and knowledge in the making of global trade means recognizing the social and cultural relationships that lie at the heart of the economic arrangements of mercantile capital. It is also the case that if the 'logic' of capital was felt by those engaged in these forms of exchange as a 'logic' – as an impersonal, inexorable and determining force – then that was exactly the effect achieved by the separations, hierarchies and controls instituted in the factories' writing offices as the sites of local practices of abstraction and standardization performed upon chains and compilations of inscriptions and reinscriptions.¹¹⁸ There is, therefore, no history of capitalism that is only abstract and universal, standing apart from the institutional, social and cultural forms, the different histories and geographies of capital, through which modes of production, consumption and exchange are organized.¹¹⁹ It was within these restricted public spaces, and only within them, that the English East India Company could turn its concerns into an objective and controlling profit-seeking force or 'logic' external to its servants' private interests.

Streynsham Master helped to make this world, but it was also part of his downfall. As well as reorganizing the factories, Master also made a substantial fortune in private trade which raised suspicions against him. When he finally lost the support of the Court of Directors and was removed as agent at Fort St George, many claims were made that he had taken illegitimate advantage of his powerful position to extort funds for his own benefit. One claim was that he had sold four elephants belonging to the rich Indian merchant Pedda Venkatadri, and had pocketed the proceeds. Questioned on it by the council, he claimed that his memory was so bad that he could not remember if there had been any transaction or not. When the final showdown came 'his answers were all evasive & nothing but shifts, til a paper was shown to him under his own handwriting found in a desk in the Consultation room (w^{ch} he forgot to take away with him upon his removeall) mentioning the receipt of p^{as} 4930: for 4 Elephants he sould, w^{ch} soe abashed him he continued silent for a good while'.¹²⁰ All that Master had done in using

writing and accounting to construct a public sphere of Company business against which private interests would readily stand out had finally caught up with him.

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Notes

- ¹ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978).
- ² Oriental and India Office Collection [OIOC] European MSS E210 *Sir Streynsham Master* 1/10: 'A Memorandum of y^e good services done y^e East India Company by Streynsham Master', f. 51v.
- ³ See also M. Ogborn, 'Writing travels: power, knowledge and ritual on the English East India Company's early voyages', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 27 (2002), pp. 155–71, and M. Ogborn, 'Geographia's pen: writing, geography and the arts of commerce, 1660–1760', *Journal of historical geography* 30 (2004), pp. 294–315, which, along with the current paper, each attend to a different mode of writing – manuscript letters, writing manuals, account books – to form part of a broader argument about the historical geographies of empire and trade that can be traced by attending to the particular practices associated with specific material and symbolic forms of both script and print.
- ⁴ I. Wallerstein, *The modern world system II: mercantilism and the consolidation of the European world-economy, 1600–1750* (London, Academic Press, 1980); E.R. Wolf, *Europe and the people without history* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982); J. Nijman, 'The VOC and the expansion of the world-system 1602–1799', *Political geography* 13 (1994), pp. 211–27.
- ⁵ For a similar critique see D. Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 15.
- ⁶ K.N. Chaudhuri, 'The East India Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a pre-modern multinational organization', in L. Blussé and F. Gaastra, eds, *Companies and trade: essays on overseas trading companies during the ancien régime* (Leiden, Leiden University Press, 1981), pp. 29–46; A.M. Carlos, 'Bonding and the agency problem: evidence from the Royal African Company, 1672–1691', *Explorations in economic history* 31 (1994), pp. 313–35; S.R.H. Jones and S.P. Ville, 'Efficient transactors or rent-seeking monopolists? The rationale for early chartered trading companies', *Journal of economic history* 56 (1996), pp. 898–915; A.M. Carlos and S. Nicholas, 'Theory and history: seventeenth-century joint-stock

- chartered trading companies', *Journal of economic history* **56** (1996), pp. 916–24; and S.R.H. Jones and S.P. Ville, 'Theory and evidence: understanding chartered trading companies', *Journal of economic history* **56** (1996), pp. 925–26.
- ⁷ Chaudhuri, *Trading world*.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ⁹ P. Du Gay and M. Pryke, eds, *Cultural economy: cultural analysis and commercial life* (London, Sage, 1999); A. Amin and N. Thrift, eds, *The Blackwell cultural economy reader* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2004); R. Hudson, 'Conceptualizing economies and their geographies: spaces, flows and circuits', *Progress in human geography* **28** (2004), pp. 447–71; N. Thrift, 'Remembering the technological unconscious by foregrounding knowledges of position', *Environment and planning D: society and space* **22** (2004), pp. 175–90.
- ¹⁰ M. Callon, ed., *The laws of the markets* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998); T. Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002); K. Knorr-Centina and U. Bruegger, 'Traders' engagement with markets: a postsocial relationship', *Theory, culture and society* **19** (2002), pp. 161–85; D. Mackenzie, 'Physics and finance: S-terms and modern finance as a topic for science studies', *Science, technology and human values* **26** (2001), pp. 115–44; T.J. Barnes, *Logics of dislocation: models, metaphors, and meanings of economic space* (New York, Guilford Press, 1996). The same point is made from anthropology rather than science studies in D. Miller, 'Virtualism: the culture of political economy', in I. Cook, D. Crouch, S. Naylor and J.R. Ryan, eds, *Cultural turns/geographical turns: perspectives on cultural geography* (Harlow, Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 196–213.
- ¹¹ B. Latour, *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987) p. 63; compare D.N. McCloskey, *Knowledge and persuasion in economics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ¹² B. Latour, *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 306.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁴ D.N. Livingstone, *Putting science in its place: geographies of scientific knowledge* (Chicago, Chicago University Press); D.N. Livingstone, 'Science, text and space: thoughts on the geography of reading', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (forthcoming).
- ¹⁵ Latour, *Science in action*, pp. 226, 252.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- ¹⁷ P. Miller, 'Governing by numbers: why calculative practices matter', *Social research* **68** (2001), pp. 379–96.
- ¹⁸ S. Shapin and S. Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the experimental life* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 25.
- ¹⁹ For another historical example, see D. Hancock, "'A world of business to do': William Freeman and the foundations of England's commercial empire, 1645-1707", *William and Mary quarterly* **57** (2000), pp. 3–34.
- ²⁰ For a parallel discussion of the production of scientific knowledge within similar 'long-distance' organizations, see S.J. Harris, 'Long-distance corporations, big sciences, and the geography of knowledge', *Configurations* **6** (1998), pp. 269–304.
- ²¹ Chaudhuri, *Trading world*.
- ²² OIOC India Office Records [IOR] E/3/88 *Despatch Book: 5th July 1672 to 9th September 1678*, f. 118v; E/3/89 *Despatch Book: 6th November 1678 to 28th June 1682*, f. 43r.
- ²³ IOR E/3/86 *Despatch Book: 6th February 1661 to 12th January 1666*, f. 33r.

- ²⁴ P.J. Marshall, 'Private British trade in the Indian Ocean before 1800', in A. Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson, eds, *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800* (Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 276–300; I.B. Watson, *Foundation for empire: English private trade in India, 1659–1760* (New Delhi, Vikas, 1980).
- ²⁵ IOR E/3/85 *Despatch Book: 9th November 1657 to 28th January 1661*, f. 183r; H. Yule, ed., *The diary of William Hedges* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1887).
- ²⁶ IOR G/26/12 *Diary of William Puckle, while at Masulipatam and Fort St George, June 1675 to Jan 1676*.
- ²⁷ R.C. Temple, *The diaries of Streynsbam Master, 1675–1680* (London, John Murray, Indian Record Series, 1911), I p. 2.
- ²⁸ IOR E/3/85 f. 183v.
- ²⁹ IOR E/3/88 f. 113v and 146v; Records of Fort St George, *Diary and consultation book, 1678–1679* (Madras, Government Press, 1911), p. 82; Records of Fort St George, *Despatches from England, 1680–1682* (Madras, Government Press, 1914), p. 22; Records of Fort St George, *Diary and consultation book, 1681* (Madras, Government Press, 1913), p. 71.
- ³⁰ IOR E/3/85 f. 183v.
- ³¹ IOR E/3/88 f. 74v; IOR H/803 *Home miscellaneous series: early papers relating to Bengal, 1670–1708*, p. 302.
- ³² IOR E/3/35 *Original Correspondence: 28th March 1674 to 20th March 1675*, f. 153r.
- ³³ *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 8; Temple, *Streynsbam Master* I p. 290, II p. 205; IOR E/3/39 *Original Correspondence: 25th March 1678 to 24th March 1679*, f. 153r.
- ³⁴ D. Wootton, ed, *Divine right and democracy: an anthology of political writing in Stuart England* (Cambridge, Hackett, 2003).
- ³⁵ IOR E/3/26 *Original Correspondence: 26th March 1659 to 23rd March 1661*, f. 168r and 206r.
- ³⁶ Records of Fort St George, *Diary and consultation book, 1672–1678* (Madras, Government Press, 1910) pp. 61, 148.
- ³⁷ IOR E/3/88 f. 147r.
- ³⁸ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 110; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 85.
- ³⁹ IOR E/3/39 f. 154v; E/3/89 f. 89r; H/803, p. 287.
- ⁴⁰ IOR E/3/85 f. 25r.
- ⁴¹ Temple, *Streynsbam Master*, II pp. 78–9.
- ⁴² *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 8; Temple, *Streynsbam Master*, I p. 245, II p. 198; IOR G/26/12 p. 4. For factory justifications see, for example, Records of Fort St George, *Diary and Consultation Book, 1679–1680* (Madras, Government Press, 1911), pp. 1–2; *Consultation book, 1681*, p. 2. For Company actions on the basis of the consultation books sent home, see IOR E/3/89 f. 100v.
- ⁴³ IOR E/3/41 *Original Correspondence: 25th March 1681 to 20th March 1682*, ff. 82r, 220r.
- ⁴⁴ Temple, *Streynsbam Master*, II p. 6. J. Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989) argues that the fiscal-military state was instituting similar rules.
- ⁴⁵ IOR E/3/88 f. 147r; E/3/85 f. 183v.
- ⁴⁶ IOR E/3/86 f. 50r and H/803 p. 354, which concerned Mr Vincent at Hugli, whose books showed him to be 'doing all things by himself and according to his own will without consultacon'.
- ⁴⁷ Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump*, p. 39.
- ⁴⁸ Records of Fort St George, *Despatches from England, 1670–1677* (Madras, Government Press, 1911), p. 129.

- ⁴⁹ OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/10: 'The character of government at Fort St George from 1672 to 1677', f. 29r.
- ⁵⁰ IOR E/3/37 *Original Correspondence: 5th April 1676 to March 1677*, ff. 56v and 66r. Langhorn also commented on Puckle's own behaviour: 'his irregular whisperings in time of Consultations both here and at Metchlep^m: and pulling those of Councell aside, and into other roomes, never practised that we know of by any but himself.'
- ⁵¹ IOR E/3/88 f. 144r and E.B. Sainsbury, ed., *A calendar of the court minutes of the East India Company, 1664–1667* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 418.
- ⁵² IOR E/3/88 f. 145r and *New dictionary of national biography*.
- ⁵³ It was also based on leaving copies of 'the Surratt Bookes letter M' at the factories: see Temple, *Streynsham Master*, II pp. 1–2, 102–3; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 6.
- ⁵⁴ IOR E/3/39 ff. 155r–v.
- ⁵⁵ Although, for a bookkeeper whose figure 8 was 'hardly to be known', see *Despatches from England, 1680–1682*, p. 11.
- ⁵⁶ A.G. Hopwood and P. Miller, eds, *Accounting as social and institutional practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ⁵⁷ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I pp. 282, 498–99; II pp. 165–66; IOR E/3/40 *Original Correspondence: 28th March 1679 to 5th April 1681*, ff. 192v–193r.
- ⁵⁸ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I pp. 280–81.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- ⁶⁰ *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, pp. 6–8.
- ⁶¹ IOR E/3/41 f. 107r.
- ⁶² Temple, *Streynsham Master*, II pp. 2, 331; IOR E/3/89 ff. 33v–34r.
- ⁶³ *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, pp. 3–17, 55, 144–9; IOR E/3/89 f. 43r.
- ⁶⁴ IOR E/3/89 f. 88v, condemning all the factories in the Bay except Kassimbazar.
- ⁶⁵ M. Poovey, *A history of the modern fact: problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998); M.R. Hunt, *The middling sort: commerce, gender, and the family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).
- ⁶⁶ IOR E/3/88 f. 80r.
- ⁶⁷ Yule, *William Hedges*, II cccvi; Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I p. 274.
- ⁶⁸ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, pp. 82–83, 131–33; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, pp. 108–10, 126–27.
- ⁶⁹ IOR G/26/12, pp. 26, 44.
- ⁷⁰ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 82; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, pp. 8–9.
- ⁷¹ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 82.
- ⁷² IOR E/3/88 ff. 145v–146r; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 55; *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, p. 53.
- ⁷³ IOR E/3/37 f. 58v.
- ⁷⁴ M. S. Kumar, 'The evolution of spatial ordering in colonial Madras,' in A. Blunt and C. McEwan, eds, *Postcolonial geographies* (London, Continuum, 2002), pp. 85–98.
- ⁷⁵ IOR E/3/88 ff. 35v and 113v–114r. For disputes over position, see the Chaplain at Masulipatnam's complaint to William Puckle (IOR G/26/12 p. 14) 'that he hath not that respect & place of preference at Table & elsewhere that is due unto him[.] He being a Minister & M^r of Art of the University of Oxford'
- ⁷⁶ The most damning accusations related, it seemed, to sexual impropriety, Catholicism and defrauding the Company; see e.g., *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, pp. 62–7; OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/10 f. 29v.

- ⁷⁷ IOR E/3/37 f. 58v.
- ⁷⁸ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I p. 247, II. p. 8; IOR E/3/88 f. 35v.
- ⁷⁹ IOR E/3/35 f. 63r.
- ⁸⁰ OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/10 f. 29r.
- ⁸¹ For private trade and its disruption of accounting at Masulipatnam see *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, p. 63; *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 56; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 19. IOR E/3/42 *Original Correspondence: 25th March 1682 to 24th March 1683*, f. 31r, notes that ‘tis not at all reasonable, (what ever opinions some may have) that a Banians mere affirmation should countroul our books of Acc^{ts}...’. For negligence and trickery, see *Despatches from England, 1680–1682*, p. 11; *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 85.
- ⁸² IOR E/3/89 ff. 38r and 82v; E/3/88 f. 148v.
- ⁸³ IOR E/3/88 f. 114r.
- ⁸⁴ J. Styles, ‘Product innovation in early modern London’, *Past and present* **168** (2000), pp. 124–69.
- ⁸⁵ See e.g. E.B. Sainsbury, ed., *A calendar of the court minutes of the East India Company, 1674–1676* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935).
- ⁸⁶ IOR E/3/88 f. 49v; Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I p. 251.
- ⁸⁷ IOR E/3/88 f. 116v.
- ⁸⁸ IOR E/3/37 f. 45v.
- ⁸⁹ IOR E/3/39 ff. 395v–396r; Temple, *Streynsham Master*, II p. 7.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 5–6; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 8.
- ⁹¹ *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, pp. 45–54; IOR E/3/86 ff. 77r and 87r; E/3/39 f. 217v.
- ⁹² Yule, *William Hedges*, II xii; IOR E/3/88 f. 74r and E/3/37 ff. 53v–58r.
- ⁹³ IOR E/3/88 f. 5v.
- ⁹⁴ IOR E/3/86 f. 25r.
- ⁹⁵ *Consultation book, 1680–1681*, p. 60; *Despatches from England, 1680–1682*, pp. 32–33. In IOR E/3/88 f. 197r the directors warned that ‘they that slight them that Act by our authority, doe the same to us...’.
- ⁹⁶ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 48.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ⁹⁸ OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/10 f. 29r.
- ⁹⁹ *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 82.
- ¹⁰⁰ IOR E/3/89 f. 229r; J. Hill, *The young secretary’s guide* (London, H. Rhodes, 1689), p. 5.
- ¹⁰¹ IOR E/3/26 f. 54r; E/3/89 f. 34r; E/3/36 *Original Correspondence: 25th March 1675 to March 1676*, ff. 188r–v; H/803 pp. 363 and 399; *Consultation book, 1678–1679*, p. 87.
- ¹⁰² *Despatches from England, 1670–1677*, p. 137: para. 105 of the letter of 12 Dec. 1677 sanctioned discretion and was later cited as justification in factories’ consultation books (see n. 31 above).
- ¹⁰³ IOR E/3/37 f. 41r.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 47v.
- ¹⁰⁵ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, I p. 494.
- ¹⁰⁶ IOR E/3/37 f. 47r.
- ¹⁰⁷ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, II p. 7.
- ¹⁰⁸ IOR E/3/88 f. 251r.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, ff. 181r, 249v; E/3/89 f. 31v.
- ¹¹⁰ IOR E/3/89 f. 148r.
- ¹¹¹ IOR E/3/89 ff. 82r–v, 85r, 148r.

- ¹¹² *Despatches from England, 1680–1682*, p. 41; IOR E/3/89 f. 225v.
- ¹¹³ OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/7: 'A letter from Sir James Oxenden of Deane to Mr Streynsham Master at Madras, 12th January 1678', ff. 18r–19v.
- ¹¹⁴ IOR E/3/86 f. 91; OIOC Eur MSS E210/1/10 f. 29r; *Consultation book, 1672–1678*, p. 160.
- ¹¹⁵ IOR G/26/12 p. 14.
- ¹¹⁶ IOR E/3/88 f. 250r.
- ¹¹⁷ Temple, *Streynsham Master*, II p. 333.
- ¹¹⁸ T.M. Porter, *Trust in numbers: the pursuit of objectivity in science and public life* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995).
- ¹¹⁹ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000).
- ¹²⁰ *Consultation book, 1681*, p. 60.