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# Fort St. George and the Making of British Madras

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## Introduction

This book examines Fort St. George not merely as a landmark on the Coromandel coast but as the administrative, military, and commercial nucleus from which British Madras was made. From its beginnings as a fortified “factory” of the East India Company to its evolution into the seat of a presidency town, the Fort generated forms of power whose traces endure in the fabric of modern Chennai. By foregrounding governance practices, fort architecture, and settler society, the chapters that follow show how institutions shaped space and how space, in turn, structured institutions. The result is a detailed institutional history attentive to the everyday mechanics of rule and the urban worlds they produced.

The story begins with coastal trade and the quest for secure ground. Company merchants negotiated for land and protection; engineers laid out walls and bastions; clerks and factors assembled a paper apparatus to record exchange, adjudicate disputes, and coordinate military defense. As the Fort’s physical shell thickened, a corporate sovereignty took form—neither purely royal nor purely mercantile—anchored in charters, councils, and routines of consultation. These routines stabilized commerce in textiles and grain while furnishing the legal and fiscal instruments that would knit port, town, and hinterland together.

Urban life in and around the Fort emerged through patterned proximities and separations. The juxtaposition of White Town and Black Town, the esplanade and bazaar streets, the port and warehouse yards, created a managed geography of encounter and distance. Architectural choices—street grids aligned to ramparts, regulated gateways, drill grounds, and customs posts—channelled movement, mediated risk, and signaled authority. Such spatial logics were never static: sieges, storms, fires, and epidemics pressed officials and residents into recurrent acts of rebuilding that repeatedly reset the city’s form while reaffirming the Fort’s centrality.

At the heart of this urban regime stood institutions that rendered the city legible. Councils minuted decisions; mayoral courts and police choultries regulated conduct; revenue farms, licenses, and rentals converted occupancy into income; and surveys transformed land into property. Brokers, interpreters, and dubashes were indispensable intermediaries, translating across languages, markets, and legal cultures. The Fort’s ascendancy thus depended as much on paperwork and procedures as on masonry and guns—a paper empire whose archives continue to structure what we can know about the past.

Yet governance was never a one-way imposition. Households, castes, congregations, and occupational groups shaped the city’s rhythms and institutions from below.

Migrant laborers, enslaved and free, sustained households and workshops; women's work and property practices bound domestic economies to commercial ones; petitions, boycotts, and market flight disciplined officials as often as officials disciplined townspeople. Religious buildings and festivals negotiated visibility and jurisdiction, transforming sacred landscapes into political theaters. Through such frictions, a distinctive settler society took root—hybrid, hierarchical, and generative of new urban norms.

Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, war and rivalry—especially with French forces and regional powers—rearmed the Fort and reoriented the city. Crises of famine and disease catalyzed sanitary reforms and infrastructural projects, while port expansion and road building bound Madras more tightly to its hinterland. By the later nineteenth century, the Fort presided over an enlarged administrative sphere in which municipal regulation, public works, and print publics reshaped urban life. These developments consolidated imperial Madras but also opened new arenas of contestation.

The chapters proceed thematically and chronologically to trace these intertwined processes. We move from the Fort's founding and fabric to its councils and courts; from the port and markets to households and built forms; from mapping and property to protest and reform; and finally to the legacies that link colonial Madras to contemporary Chennai. Throughout, the book argues that governance practices, spatial design, and social intermediaries forged durable patterns—of bureaucracy, segregation, and infrastructural order—that outlasted the Company and the Raj. For students and scholars of colonial urbanism, Fort St. George offers a laboratory in which to study how institutions make cities, and how cities, in turn, make power.

## CHAPTER ONE: Founding a Factory on the Coromandel Coast

The early seventeenth century found European trading companies in a desperate scramble for footholds along the lucrative spice routes of Asia. The Coromandel Coast, stretching along the southeastern edge of the Indian subcontinent, was not a primary source of spices itself, but it was an essential hub for the production of textiles—fine calicoes and muslins—that were highly sought after in Southeast Asia in exchange for those very spices. For the English East India Company, a charter from Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 had opened the door to this grand venture, but the reality on the ground was a far cry from the grand pronouncements of royal prerogative. It was a world of shifting allegiances, fierce competition, and the constant need for negotiation, often with local powers who held the real sway.

Prior to establishing themselves in what would become Madras, the English had attempted to secure various trading posts along the Coromandel Coast. Masulipatnam, further north, had been one such early factory, established in 1611. While it offered access to valuable trade, it was plagued by political instability and the vexatious demands of local governors and the powerful Sultanate of Golconda. The lack of a secure, independent base meant that the Company's investments were always vulnerable, their goods subject to arbitrary levies, and their personnel exposed to unpredictable dangers. The Company's directors in London, ever focused on profit margins and the security of their ventures, increasingly pressed for a more defensible and amenable location. They sought not just a place to trade, but a place to *control* their trade, to protect their assets, and to project a modicum of authority.

The year 1639 proved to be a pivotal one. Francis Day, a member of the Masulipatnam Council and the Chief of the Armagon factory, was tasked with finding a more suitable site. He was a man of considerable local knowledge, fluent in several Indian languages, and possessed of the grit and diplomatic skill necessary for such an undertaking. Day's quest led him south, past Portuguese São Tomé, a well-established settlement that represented both a potential trading partner and a formidable rival. He was looking for a location that offered a good anchorage for ships, access to textile-producing hinterlands, and, crucially, a local ruler willing to grant the English significant autonomy.

Day's search culminated in his negotiations with Damarla Venkatadri Nayaka, a local chieftain and a representative of the Raja of Chandragiri, who then held sway over the region. The Nayaka controlled a stretch of barren coastline situated between the Cooum and Egmore rivers. This seemingly unremarkable patch of land, however,

possessed several key advantages. It had a reasonably sheltered roadstead for ships, though not a true harbor, and it was close to important weaving villages inland. More importantly, the Nayaka was amenable to the English establishing a permanent settlement, seeing the potential economic benefits and perhaps a strategic ally against other regional powers.

The negotiations were not without their complexities. The English sought not merely permission to trade, but the right to build a fort, to mint their own currency, and to administer their own justice within the granted territory. These were significant concessions, indicative of the Company's long-term ambitions beyond mere mercantile exchange. The Nayaka, in turn, understood the value of European trade and the customs duties it would bring, but he also had to balance these advantages against the potential for an overly powerful foreign presence on his land. The resulting grant, formally issued on August 22, 1639, was a landmark document, laying the legal foundation for what would become Fort St. George and, subsequently, the city of Madras.

The grant conveyed to the English a strip of land approximately three miles long and one mile wide. Crucially, it included permission to "build a Fort or Castle" and to "coin money," among other privileges. This was more than just a trading post agreement; it was a quasi-sovereign concession that allowed the Company to begin establishing a territorial base. Andrew Cogan, another prominent Company official, played a significant role in finalizing these arrangements and is often credited alongside Francis Day for the successful acquisition of the site. Their combined efforts, shrewd diplomacy, and understanding of local power dynamics were instrumental in securing this vital foothold.

The immediate task following the grant was to begin the physical construction of the factory and its defenses. The site itself, a sandy spit exposed to the vagaries of the monsoon and the sea, presented considerable challenges. There was no readily available stone or timber, meaning most building materials had to be transported from some distance. Despite these logistical hurdles, the imperative to build quickly was paramount. The threat of rival European powers, particularly the Portuguese and the Dutch, who viewed the English presence with suspicion and hostility, underscored the need for robust fortifications.

The early settlement was a rudimentary affair, a far cry from the imposing structure it would eventually become. Initially, a simple stockade and a few temporary buildings were erected to house the Company's factors, goods, and a small contingent of soldiers. The focus was on functionality and defense. The factory building itself would serve as both an office and a residence for the Company's servants, while warehouses protected the valuable textiles awaiting shipment. This initial phase was characterized by improvisation and a constant struggle against the elements and the ever-present threat of external aggression.

The name chosen for the new settlement was Fort St. George, a deliberate invocation of England's patron saint, symbolizing a projection of English identity and power onto this distant shore. It was a statement of intent, signaling that this was not merely a transient trading post but a permanent establishment, a bastion of British interest in the East. The naming ceremony, though likely a modest affair given the nascent state of the settlement, was nonetheless significant in imbuing the place with a sense of purpose and identity.

The decision to fortify was a departure from earlier, less defended factory models. The experiences at Masulipatnam and other vulnerable outposts had taught the Company a hard lesson: trade could not flourish without security. A fortified settlement offered protection not only from rival European powers but also from potential incursions by local warlords or bandits. It provided a secure haven for goods, a base from which to conduct trade, and a visible symbol of the Company's growing influence. The transition from unfortified factory to fortified stronghold was a crucial step in the Company's evolution from a purely commercial entity to one with territorial ambitions and the means to enforce them.

The early years of Fort St. George were marked by considerable hardship. The climate was harsh, disease was rampant, and the isolation was profound. Company servants, often young men from Britain, faced a stark reality of difficult living conditions and high mortality rates. Yet, the promise of wealth, both for the Company and for individuals who could make their fortunes, drew a steady stream of adventurers, merchants, and administrators to this distant outpost. The lure of the East, with its exotic goods and vast potential, proved to be a powerful motivator, overcoming the formidable challenges of establishing a new life on the Coromandel Coast.

The establishment of Fort St. George also marked the beginning of a complex relationship with the local population. While the English sought autonomy, they were entirely dependent on local labor, artisans, and merchants for the functioning of their factory. Weavers produced the textiles, laborers constructed the buildings, and local brokers facilitated trade and supplied provisions. This interdependence, while often strained, was fundamental to the Fort's survival and growth. The initial grant from the Nayaka had provided the legal framework, but the everyday reality was one of constant interaction and negotiation with the diverse communities that already inhabited the Coromandel plain.

The land on which Fort St. George was built was not an empty wilderness. It was part of a vibrant coastal ecosystem, inhabited by fishing communities and agriculturalists, and crisscrossed by ancient trade routes. The arrival of the English, with their demand for land and their construction activities, inevitably displaced some existing populations and altered traditional patterns of life. This initial disruption, though perhaps minor in the grand scheme of things, set a precedent for the ongoing

transformation of the landscape and the social fabric that would characterize the growth of Madras. The Fort, from its very inception, was an imposition on an existing world, creating new dynamics and hierarchies.

The architectural choices made during these early construction phases were pragmatic, reflecting the immediate needs for defense and shelter. The walls were relatively modest, built of locally available materials, and designed to withstand musket fire and small-scale assaults. The layout of the factory within the nascent fort was also practical, prioritizing storage for goods and living quarters for the small European population. There was little thought yet for grand urban planning or aesthetic considerations; survival and commercial viability were the overriding concerns. Yet, even in this rudimentary form, the foundations of a future city were being laid.

The presence of the Portuguese at São Tomé, a mere three miles south, cast a long shadow over the early days of Fort St. George. The Portuguese had been established on the Coromandel Coast for over a century and viewed any new European arrivals as rivals to be contained or, if possible, expelled. This rivalry manifested in skirmishes, attempts to disrupt trade, and diplomatic maneuvering. The proximity of São Tomé underscored the critical need for robust fortifications at Fort St. George and influenced the pace and scale of its early construction. The English knew they were not alone and had to assert their presence through strength.

The Dutch, another formidable maritime power, also maintained a strong presence along the Coromandel Coast, particularly at Pulicat, further north. Their well-established factories and naval capabilities presented another significant challenge to the nascent English settlement. The competitive environment forced the English to be constantly vigilant, to cultivate alliances with local rulers, and to ensure their factory was capable of defending itself. This multi-polar European rivalry was a defining feature of early colonial encounters in India, and Fort St. George was born directly into this crucible of competition.

The process of constructing the fort also required a substantial investment of capital and human resources. Funds had to be remitted from London, often a slow and unreliable process, and skilled European engineers and master masons were in short supply. The Company relied heavily on local labor, often paid in kind or through a combination of wages and provisions. This reliance on Indian labor, from skilled craftsmen to common laborers, was a fundamental aspect of the Fort's construction and would remain so throughout its history, highlighting the collaborative yet hierarchical nature of colonial enterprise.

The early administration of Fort St. George was rudimentary, essentially a hierarchical structure headed by a 'Chief Factor' or 'Agent' who reported to the Company's council in Masulipatnam or Surat. Decisions regarding trade, defense, and relations with local

powers were made by a small council of Company servants residing within the fort. This small group of Europeans formed the nucleus of the future administrative apparatus that would govern not only the fort but also the expanding settlement around it. Their daily routines involved managing inventories, negotiating with merchants, and overseeing the construction efforts, all while grappling with the challenges of a remote and often hostile environment.

The arrival of a new ship from England or a neighboring factory was always a significant event, bringing news, supplies, and new personnel. These arrivals punctuated the otherwise monotonous and often perilous existence within the early fort. Letters and instructions from the Company's directors in London, often months or even years old, guided the actions of the local agents, attempting to steer the enterprise from afar. The vast distances and slow communication meant that considerable autonomy and initiative were required of the factors on the ground, shaping their decision-making and fostering a distinct local culture of governance.

The economic rationale behind the establishment of Fort St. George was, first and foremost, the acquisition of textiles. The Coromandel Coast was renowned for its cotton weaving industry, producing high-quality fabrics that were in demand across Asia and, increasingly, in Europe. The Company sought to secure a steady supply of these goods, bypassing the intermediaries and arbitrary taxes that plagued their operations elsewhere. The fort was intended to be a secure collection point, a place where textiles could be stored, processed, and prepared for shipment back to England or to other markets in the East.

The grant of 1639 also included the right to mint currency, a privilege that underscored the Company's growing aspirations for economic and political independence. While the mint would not be fully operational for some time, its inclusion in the initial grant signaled an intent to control the financial levers of trade within their designated territory. A stable and recognized currency was essential for facilitating commerce and asserting a degree of sovereignty, allowing the Company to move beyond mere barter or reliance on local coinage.

The establishment of Fort St. George on the Coromandel Coast was, therefore, much more than the simple founding of a trading post. It represented a strategic shift in the English East India Company's approach to its operations in India. It was an acknowledgment that commerce and power were inextricably linked, and that in order to secure the former, the latter had to be cultivated. The initial, arduous work of surveying, negotiating, and building laid the groundwork for a fortified settlement that would gradually grow into a significant urban center, fundamentally altering the landscape and the history of southeastern India. The small group of factors, engineers, and soldiers, toiling under the harsh sun, were unwittingly initiating a process that would culminate in the making of British Madras.

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