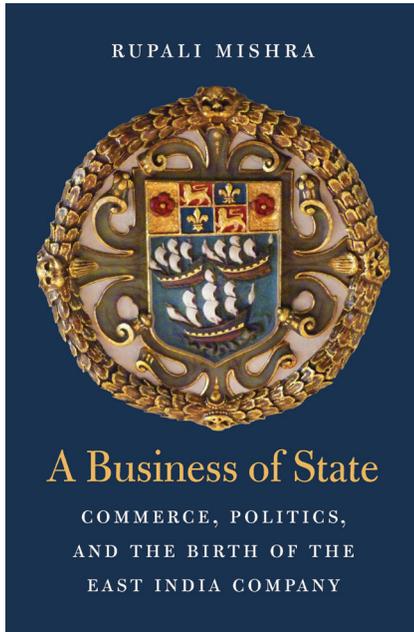


## Note

Rupali Mishra, *A Business of State. Commerce, Politics, and the Birth of the East India Company*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2018, 432 pp. ISBN 9780674984561.



There exists an uncomfortable tension between nationalist views of empire and the early modern reality of overseas merchant companies. On the one hand the merchant companies operated outside the early modern states, while on the other hand they were chartered by sovereigns and often negotiated war and peace overseas. In other words, territorial aims not always overlapped with commercial aims. For the English case, this tension has been addressed by considering companies as states (Philip Stern, 2011) or through the lens of corporate constitutionalism (William Pettigrew, 2016). In this book, Rupali Mishra addresses the issue by investigating the relationship between metropolitan politics and the English East India Company (EIC). Moreover, her book offers an Asian perspective on a historiographical question that is traditionally more Atlantic-centered and on a period of the EIC that is seriously understudied – the early seventeenth century.

In ten wonderfully written and engaging chapters, Mishra addresses a broad range of topics touching upon the relationship between the company and the political world. While some chapters have a more formal-legalistic foundation (such as chapter one on the patent and chapter two on authority), other chapters demonstrate an intimate knowledge of boardroom meetings or public debates. The result is a brilliant analysis of the inner workings of the company in the first part of the book, and a detailed argument on the position of the company vis-à-vis the crown in the second part of the book. Some themes, such as the balance between public and private interests, can be found as a red thread through both parts. Since all chapters are based on extensive and thorough archival

research, each chapter is peppered with insightful and enlightening quotes that support Mishra's argument.

One of the most intriguing themes covered in the book involves the media strategy of the company. Chapter five starts with a detailed description of the boardroom decision-making process to engage in a public debate on the role of company and reconstructs who was responsible for writing what and how this was influenced by the company leadership. The topic features again in chapter eight, although this time to tackle the question of how to influence the right audience by, for instance, first sending copies of a pamphlet to 'principal persons of the nobility' (227) before sending it to other audiences. Another of the book's highlights is a detailed narrative of the voting process and the debates that surrounded it. In 1619, one individual, John Holloway, crafted an ingenious and beautifully decorated ballot box to anonymise voting. Despite the rejection of the introduction of the ballot box by the EIC, amazingly it has survived and is still in use by the Saddlers' Company for yearly elections.

The role of the EIC was of course not limited to domestic politics. On many occasions Mishra takes the reader into the world of international diplomacy, where the EIC demanded a prominent place for itself. As a result, the Dutch States-General, the VOC, and their relationship with the EIC feature prominently, which makes this book an interesting read for an audience beyond those exclusively interested in England. However, such readers might find the lack of engagement with non-Anglophone historiography disappointing and perhaps one-sided. Research on the relationship between merchants and empire is not exclusively an English affair, and particularly works on Iberian cases could have made a useful addition. The book provides a deeper understanding of English activities abroad and the relationship between the Stuart state and those activities, but could have put the English case in a broader framework of European expansion to appeal to a wider audience.

The interactions between the company and the British monarchy were not always harmonious. Although company leaders often had consideration for the requirements of the state, they were sometimes also diametrically opposed. At the same time, however, a number of privy councillors served as members of EIC, making the distinction between state and company not always clear-cut. This convergence of roles meant that interactions sometimes were of a personal, more informal nature. At other times, the company chose to petition (which was more formal in nature), to engage in pamphlet writing, or to commission defamatory paintings of opponents (231-233). This raises the question as to why the company preferred one option on one, and another on the next occasion. Was this forum shopping, did the expected result or opposition influence the choice, or were these interactions sequential (e.g. only petition when personal connections proved insufficient)? Anyone attempting to answer these questions can benefit from the groundwork in Mishra's book that is extremely rich in relevant examples.

The author also convincingly argues that the EIC's early years are paramount to understand English interests overseas and the global intersections of London politics. The relationship between the company and the state was often complicated because 'company leaders saw themselves as state actors' (305). Therefore, the concerns and debates that shaped the company were the same ones that played out in the early Stuart polity (7).

Questions of authority, privacy, and conflict management could easily spill over from one domain to the other and thus became inherently intertwined. The relationship between economic activities and politics in early seventeenth-century London is a topic that deserves this wonderful, thoroughly researched, and imaginative book.

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