



MIR MADAN AND MOHAN LAL – FIGHTERS OF A LOST BATTLE

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Abstract

The Battle of Plassey, fought on 23 June 1757, was one of the most decisive events in Indian history. It brought the decline of the independent rule of Bengal and marked the rise of the British East India Company as a territorial power. While many historians have written about Siraj-ud-Daulah's fall and Robert Clive's success, less attention has been given to the loyalty and sacrifices of two important figures—Mir Madan, the Bakshi or chief commander, and Mohan Lal, the trusted Diwan of the Nawab. Both men stood by their ruler in the face of betrayal, treachery, and overwhelming odds. This paper studies their lives, their role in the battle, and why their courage could not prevent defeat. Using primary documents such as the *Fifth Report* and Persian chronicles, alongside modern scholarship, this paper argues that their memory deserves a central place in the story of Bengal's fragile legacy.

Keywords

Mir Madan; Mohan Lal; Battle of Plassey; Siraj-ud-Daulah; Nawabs of Bengal; East India Company.

Introduction

The Battle of Plassey, fought on 23 June 1757, is often described as a turning point in Indian history. It was not only a military encounter but also the beginning of a new political order in Bengal and, eventually, across India. Before Plassey, Bengal was considered the wealthiest province of the Mughal Empire, famous for its fertile soil, skilled artisans, and thriving trade¹. Whoever controlled Bengal gained access to enormous resources, which naturally drew the attention of both Indian elites and European trading companies².

Siraj-ud-Daulah became Nawab of Bengal in 1756. Though young and ambitious, he faced great challenges. Many nobles in his court disliked his rise, and influential banking families such as the Jagat Seths were wary of his authority³. At the same time, the English East India Company, already enjoying trading privileges, wanted more freedom and security for its settlements. This led to growing tension between the Nawab and the Company⁴.

When the two sides finally clashed at Plassey, Siraj's army was far larger in number compared to the Company's force. Yet the outcome was shaped by betrayal. Mir Jafar and other commanders secretly sided with the British, keeping their troops inactive. The Company, though small, had better unity and artillery, which gave them the final victory⁵.

Amidst this environment of treachery, two men stood apart. Mir Madan, the Bakshi or chief commander, and Mohan Lal, the Diwan and trusted adviser, remained loyal to Siraj until the end. Their bravery and sacrifice show that the defeat of Bengal was not simply because of weakness, but because of conspiracy from within⁶.

This paper aims to restore their place in the story of Plassey by examining their role through primary sources such as the *Seir Mutaqherin* and the *Fifth Report of 1812*, along with modern historical studies⁷.

Background: Bengal before Plassey

In the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal was one of the richest regions in Asia. Its cotton and silk textiles were highly valued in global markets, reaching Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia¹. The province also produced rice, sugar, saltpeter, and opium, making it a key hub in both regional and international trade².

This prosperity also brought competition. The English, French, and Dutch East India Companies all had settlements along Bengal's rivers. Among them, the English East India Company steadily grew in influence, especially around Calcutta³.

Politically, Bengal was still a part of the Mughal Empire, but in practice the Nawabs ruled almost independently. Murshid Quli Khan, the first Nawab, had shifted the capital to Murshidabad and developed a strong system of revenue collection⁴. His successors continued this system, and Bengal remained stable under Alivardi Khan. However, when Alivardi died in 1756, his grandson Siraj-ud-Daulah inherited the throne and soon faced opposition⁵.

Siraj's position was fragile. Senior commanders like Mir Jafar were dissatisfied and sought greater power. The Jagat Seth bankers and other wealthy families also preferred a ruler who would protect their interests⁶. On top of this, the East India Company had grievances against Siraj. He demanded that the Company stop expanding its fortifications and pay full customs duties. When the Company refused, Siraj attacked Calcutta in 1756, an episode remembered in British writings as the "Black Hole of Calcutta"⁷.

By early 1757, Bengal was a province divided by politics and intrigue. On one side stood Siraj, supported by loyal officers like Mir Madan and Mohan Lal. On the other side were discontented nobles, merchant bankers, and the Company, all preparing to replace him. This background explains why Plassey became inevitable⁸.

Mir Madan: The Loyal Commander

Mir Madan was the Bakshi, or chief military officer, in Siraj-ud-Daulah's army. In the tradition of the Nawabs, the Bakshi was responsible for paying troops and leading them into battle. He had a reputation for courage and discipline, qualities that became clear at Plassey. When many of Siraj's commanders were either hesitant or secretly disloyal, Mir Madan pressed the fight with determination¹.

On 23 June 1757, the battle began early in the morning near the mango grove of Plassey. Robert Clive commanded the Company's forces, which included a small number of European soldiers and sepoys, supported by artillery. Opposite them stood Siraj's much larger force, numbering over 40,000 men. Yet only a small portion of this force was active in battle. Mir Madan led repeated charges against the Company line, trying to break their resistance². His troops engaged the Company's sepoys and pressed them hard, while other commanders such as Mir Jafar kept their contingents inactive.

Contemporary accounts show that Mir Madan's leadership kept Siraj's army in the fight for several hours. The Persian chronicle *Seir Mutaqherin* records that he was struck by a cannonball during one of these attacks³. Robert Orme, in his history of the battle, also noted that Madan's death was the turning point. Once he fell, confusion spread through the Nawab's ranks, and the morale of his active troops collapsed⁴.

Mir Madan's role highlights an important point: Plassey was not lost because everyone failed to fight. At least one loyal commander did his duty until the very end. His fall was both a personal tragedy and a symbolic moment for Bengal. Without him, the Nawab's forces had no real leader in the field, and betrayal quickly took over⁵.

Even British writers, who often glorified Clive's victory, admitted that Madan fought with bravery. Indian traditions in Murshidabad and Nadia also preserved his memory as a symbol of loyalty. Yet mainstream histories often pass over his name, focusing instead on the betrayal of Mir Jafar or the weakness of Siraj.

Remembering Mir Madan gives us a fuller picture of the battle and shows that courage did exist on the Nawab's side⁶.

Mohan Lal: The Faithful Minister

Mohan Lal was one of Siraj-ud-Daulah's most trusted civil officers. Unlike Mir Madan, who commanded soldiers in the field, Mohan Lal's role was mainly administrative. He acted as the Nawab's Diwan and close adviser, handling revenue matters and giving counsel in times of crisis. His loyalty to Siraj during the campaign of 1757 shows that resistance was not limited to the battlefield alone¹.

When tensions with the East India Company escalated, Mohan Lal supported the Nawab's strong stance. He advised Siraj to be cautious of the Company's growing power and to enforce royal authority over its fortifications and trade. British accounts, though often critical of him, acknowledge that Mohan Lal was clever, resourceful, and deeply involved in the Nawab's decisions². The *Fifth Report of 1812* also refers to his role in Bengal politics, noting his influence in revenue affairs³.

During the Battle of Plassey itself, Mohan Lal did not lead troops but stayed near the Nawab, providing counsel and managing the administrative side of the camp. Persian sources describe how he remained with Siraj even as betrayal spread among the commanders⁴. After the fall of Mir Madan, when panic began to rise, Mohan Lal tried to maintain order and urged Siraj not to abandon the field immediately⁵.

In the days following the defeat, Mohan Lal continued to stand by the Nawab. He accompanied Siraj in his flight from the battlefield and later tried to protect him during his escape toward Murshidabad. Though the attempt failed, his loyalty sets him apart from many other officials who quickly shifted allegiance to Mir Jafar and the British⁶.

Mohan Lal's contribution is often overshadowed because he was not a military figure. Yet his loyalty demonstrates that Siraj was not entirely isolated. He had administrators and advisers who stood with him until the end. His story reminds us that the collapse of Bengal's independence was not just the result of one man's weakness, but of a wider conspiracy in which only a few remained true⁷.

The Battle of Plassey: A Narrative

The Battle of Plassey was fought on 23 June 1757 near the small village of Palashi, close to the Bhagirathi River. The battlefield was surrounded by mango groves, which gave some shade and cover but also restricted movement. On one side was Robert Clive with about 3,000 troops, including a few hundred European soldiers and several thousand Indian sepoys. On the other side was Siraj-ud-Daulah with a force of more than 40,000 men, supported by fifty pieces of artillery¹.

On paper, the Nawab's army was much stronger. But numbers alone did not decide the outcome. The Company had disciplined troops, modern artillery, and a clear plan of battle. More importantly, Siraj's camp was divided. Mir Jafar and other commanders had already reached a secret understanding with Clive. Their forces remained inactive during the fighting².

The battle began in the morning with an exchange of artillery fire. The Nawab's guns were large but poorly managed, while the Company used lighter, mobile artillery. This gave the British an advantage. For several hours, the firing continued with little progress. In this situation, Mir Madan took the initiative. He led repeated charges against the Company's line, pressing them hard and forcing them to defend strongly³. His actions showed that at least part of the Nawab's army was willing to fight.

Around midday, heavy rain fell on the battlefield. The Nawab's troops failed to keep their gunpowder dry, while the Company had better protection for its supplies. This allowed Clive's men to resume firing quickly after the rain, while the Nawab's artillery fell silent⁴. Still, Mir Madan continued to encourage attacks. It was during one of these movements that he was struck by a cannonball and killed. His death caused immediate confusion in the Nawab's army⁵.

After the fall of Mir Madan, Siraj relied on advice from Mohan Lal and a few others. Mohan Lal tried to steady the situation and urged the Nawab not to abandon the field too soon. But with most of the army refusing to engage and Mir Jafar's troops holding back, the battle was effectively lost. By late afternoon, Clive ordered a general advance. The Nawab's forces scattered, and Siraj fled toward Murshidabad⁶.

The battle lasted less than a day, but its consequences were enormous. The loyalty of Mir Madan and Mohan Lal could not balance the betrayal of others. Their courage delayed the Company's victory for some hours, but once Mir Madan fell and the larger army stood idle, the result was sealed⁷.

Why Bravery Could Not Win: Causes of Defeat

The Battle of Plassey is often remembered as a fight where betrayal decided the outcome. But to understand why the courage of Mir Madan and the loyalty of Mohan Lal could not change the result, it is important to look at the wider causes of defeat. Several factors came together on that day, and bravery alone could not overcome them.

1. Betrayal within the camp

The biggest reason for the Nawab's failure was disunity. Senior commanders like Mir Jafar had already made secret agreements with the English. During the battle, they kept their troops inactive and waited for the British to win¹. This meant that even though Siraj's army was large, only a small part of it actually fought. Mir Madan's charges showed courage, but he was left almost alone, while others simply stood by.

2. Support from Indian bankers and merchants

The East India Company did not win only with guns; it also won with money. Rich bankers such as the Jagat Seths and other merchants supported the Company because they felt Siraj was unpredictable. They gave financial help that allowed the Company to maintain its troops and buy supplies². Without this economic support, Clive's army could not have stayed in the field for long.

3. Military discipline and artillery

The Nawab's forces were numerous but poorly coordinated. Their artillery was heavy and badly managed. In contrast, the Company had lighter, mobile guns and disciplined soldiers trained in European methods. When heavy rain fell on the battlefield, the Company protected its gunpowder, while much of the Nawab's supply was ruined³. This gave the Company a huge advantage in the middle of the fight.

4. Leadership and morale

Mir Madan was the only active commander pushing forward. His death was a blow not just to strategy but also to morale. Once he fell, panic spread quickly. Siraj lost confidence and withdrew instead of trying to rally his troops. Mohan Lal tried to advise him, but with betrayal all around, his efforts were in vain⁴.

5. The role of conspiracy and planning

The English had prepared their victory well before the battle. Secret letters and negotiations with Mir Jafar and others meant that the result was decided even before the first cannon was fired. The battle itself was only the stage where this conspiracy was acted out. In such a situation, even the greatest bravery could not alter the final outcome⁵.

Taken together, these reasons show why the loyalty of two men could not save the Nawab's cause. Plassey was not only a battle but a carefully arranged political shift, backed by money, betrayal, and superior organization.

Aftermath and Memory

The immediate result of the Battle of Plassey was the collapse of Siraj-ud-Daulah's power. After fleeing the battlefield, he attempted to return to Murshidabad but found himself abandoned by many of his nobles. Within days, Mir Jafar was declared the new Nawab under the protection of the Company¹. Siraj was later captured and executed, marking a tragic end to the young ruler's short reign².

For Bengal, Plassey began a new chapter. The East India Company gained not only political influence but also direct control over trade and revenue. Though Mir Jafar held the title of Nawab, real authority now rested with the Company. This shift opened the door for further expansion and the eventual conquest of India³.

In this transformation, the names of Mir Madan and Mohan Lal quickly faded from official records. Madan had died on the field, and his memory was preserved mainly in Persian chronicles and local traditions. The *Seir Mutaqherin* described him as a brave commander who fell fighting when others stood idle⁴. British accounts, while focused on Clive's victory, also admitted his courage⁵. Yet later histories often gave more space to the story of betrayal than to the story of loyalty.

Mohan Lal, who had tried to support Siraj until the very end, also disappeared from the mainstream narrative. His loyalty was remembered in some records, but he was overshadowed by the larger drama of conspiracy. For the Company, it was more useful to show the Nawab as weak and isolated rather than to admit that he had faithful advisers who stood by him⁶.

In modern times, historians have tried to recover their memory. Brijen K. Gupta's detailed study of Plassey highlights the role of Madan and Mohan Lal in resisting the British. The Fort William–India House papers and other archival documents also reveal that their efforts were not insignificant⁷. Remembering them helps balance the narrative of Plassey. It shows that Bengal's defeat was not only about weakness or incompetence but also about treachery and conspiracy that overwhelmed real loyalty.

For Bengal's collective memory, Mir Madan became a symbol of sacrifice. His name is still recalled in parts of Nadia and Murshidabad, near the site of his fall. Mohan Lal, though less celebrated, represents the administrative side of loyalty — the idea that service to the ruler was not only on the battlefield but also in counsel and governance⁸.

Historiography and the Need for Archives

The Battle of Plassey has been written about for more than two and a half centuries. Yet, the way it has been described has often depended on who was writing, and for what purpose. British writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually presented it as a story of Robert Clive's genius and the inevitable rise of the Company. They highlighted the supposed weakness of Siraj-ud-Daulah, the treachery of Mir Jafar, and the triumph of European discipline over Indian disorder¹. In this version of events, there was little space for figures like Mir Madan or Mohan Lal.

Persian chronicles, on the other hand, gave a different picture. Works such as Ghulam Husain Khan's *Seir Mutaqherin* described the confusion within the Nawab's camp, the role of conspiracies, and the bravery of those who stood firm². These accounts, however, were less accessible to English readers and for a long time were neglected in mainstream histories.

In the twentieth century, Indian historians began to re-examine Plassey with a fresh perspective. Scholars like Jadunath Sarkar focused on the fall of the Mughal Empire and the role of regional politics³. Later, Brijen K. Gupta produced a detailed study using both Indian and European sources, which helped to balance the picture⁴. His work showed clearly that the Nawab's defeat was not simply a military collapse but the result of a wider conspiracy. In this framework, the loyalty of Madan and Mohan Lal appeared as part of a lost struggle.

Economic historians also added to the debate. Sushil Chaudhury and others looked at the prosperity of Bengal and explained how control over revenue was central to the Company's ambitions⁵. These works showed why the bankers and merchants sided with the British, and why Siraj was left isolated. Again, this context highlights the loyalty of Mir Madan and Mohan Lal, who stood with their ruler despite the overwhelming financial and political forces against him.

One of the main reasons their names faded from memory is the limited use of archival material. Collections such as the *Fort William–India House Correspondence* contain letters and reports that mention local officers, advisers, and commanders. In these papers, one can see how men like Mohan Lal were part of the administration and how Mir Madan's death was reported by contemporaries⁶. Yet much of this material has been overlooked in popular histories.

This points to a wider problem in writing Indian history: the tendency to focus on the winners. Since the British produced many of the early narratives, they framed the story in a way that glorified their success. The loyalists who resisted were quietly pushed aside. For modern scholarship, the challenge is to go back to the archives, use Persian chronicles, letters, and less-known documents, and bring back the voices of those who fought but lost⁷.

By doing so, historians can not only correct the imbalance in the story of Plassey but also give dignity to figures like Mir Madan and Mohan Lal. Their courage and loyalty deserve recognition as much as the conspiracies of Mir Jafar or the victories of Robert Clive. In fact, studying them closely helps us to understand that Indian society at the time was not passive or cowardly, but deeply divided, with some choosing loyalty while others chose betrayal⁸.

Conclusion

The Battle of Plassey has often been explained in terms of betrayal, conspiracy, and the rise of the British East India Company. While these factors are important, this paper has shown that the story is incomplete without remembering those who stood firm. Mir Madan, the Bakshi and chief military officer, led attacks with determination and fell on the battlefield, becoming the last hope of Siraj's army. Mohan Lal, the trusted Diwan, gave counsel and remained loyal to the Nawab even in defeat. Together, they represent a forgotten side of Plassey — the side of courage and loyalty amidst treachery.

Their loyalty highlights that Bengal's fall was not inevitable. There were men who resisted the Company and its allies, and who tried to keep the Nawab's authority intact. Yet their efforts were undone by larger forces: internal betrayal, the shifting alliances of bankers and merchants, the discipline and artillery of the Company, and the wider crisis of the Mughal world. These factors combined to create a situation where bravery alone could not decide the outcome.

The memory of Mir Madan and Mohan Lal has often been overshadowed. Early British writers preferred to glorify Clive's triumph. Indian nationalist histories sometimes focused more on Siraj-ud-Daulah himself, or on condemning Mir Jafar's betrayal, while leaving Madan and Mohan Lal in the background. But as this study has shown, they deserve recognition. Their stories add depth to our understanding of Plassey.

For modern readers, their example is a reminder that history is not only written by the victors. Archival sources such as the *Seir Mutaqherin*, the *Fifth Report*, and the Fort William–India House papers show that other voices existed, voices that spoke of loyalty and sacrifice. Using these sources alongside the work of later historians, we can reconstruct their contributions and give them their rightful place.

In conclusion, the Battle of Plassey should be remembered not just as the triumph of the Company through betrayal, but also as the stage where two men stood by their ruler until the end. Mir Madan and Mohan Lal may have fought a lost battle, but their memory reflects the fragile legacy of the Nawabs of Bengal. Recognizing their role makes the history of eighteenth-century Bengal richer, more balanced, and more human.

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