

# The Black Hole of Calcutta – An Empirical View

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study how Victory for the British East India Company in the **Battle of Plassey** was the start of nearly two centuries of British/ **Western Powers** in India. The battle was preceded by an attack on British-controlled Calcutta by Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah and the Black Hole massacre. The British sent reinforcements under Colonel Robert Clive and Admiral Charles Watson from Madras to Bengal and recaptured Calcutta. Clive then seized the initiative to capture the French fort of Chandernagar. Tensions and suspicions between Siraj-ud-daulah and the British culminated in the Battle of Plassey. The battle was waged during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), and, in a mirror of their European rivalry, the French East India Company (La Compagnie des Indes Orientales) sent a small contingent to fight against the British. Siraj-ud-Daulah had a vastly numerically superior force and made his stand at Plassey. The British, worried about being outnumbered, formed a conspiracy with Siraj-ud-Daulah's demoted army chief Mir Jafar, along with others such as Yar Lutuf Khan, Jagat Seths (Mahtab Chand and Swarup Chand), Umichand and Rai Durlabh. Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh and Yar Lutuf Khan thus assembled their troops near the battlefield but made no move to actually join the battle. Siraj-ud-Daulah's army with about 50,000 soldiers (including defectors), 40 cannons and 10 war elephants was defeated by 3,000 soldiers of Col. Robert Clive, owing to the flight of Siraj-ud-Daulah from the battlefield and the inactivity of the conspirators. The battle ended in 11 hours approx. This is judged to be one of the pivotal battles in the control of Indian subcontinent by the colonial powers. The British now wielded enormous influence over the Nawab, Mir Jafar and consequently acquired significant concessions for previous losses and revenue from trade.

*Key words:* **Battle of Plassey**, *Battle, Plassey, Bengal, Governor, Siraj-ud\_daulah*

## Introduction

Alivardi Khan spent the years 1741 to 1756 repelling the repeated invasions of his realms of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the Mahrattas, but was eventually forced to come to terms with them. The foreign traders established along the Hugli were little affected by the wars fought by the Nawab. They probably profited from them as increasing numbers of merchants moved east to escape from the depredations of the Mahrattas. The East India Company obtained permission to build defensive works around its settlement, which were begun but not finished. In 1756, Alivardi Khan died and was succeeded by his grandson Siraj-ud-Daulah. Siraj-ud-Daulah did not share his grandfather's esteem for the English settlement. He immediately resolved to evict the East India Company from Bengal. On the excuse that they were increasing their fortifications against him and that they were harbouring political offenders, Siraj-ud-Daulah seized the Company's factory (a storage and trading rather than a manufacturing facility) at Cossimbazar on 4th June 1756. He imprisoned the garrison and appropriated the Company's property. Robert Clive's early successes were in the south east of India, based on the East India Company's Madras settlement. The other important trading centres for the East India Company were in Bombay, on the west coast of India and, pre-eminently, at Calcutta in Bengal, at the northern end of the Bay of Bengal, in the east of the sub-continent. The English East India Company was enabled to establish a permanent presence on the Hugli

River, on which present day Calcutta stands, in around 1645, with the consent of the local rulers. The purpose of this establishment was to trade with the merchants and manufacturers in the area and to send the goods acquired by sea to England for profit. The settlement was provided with minimal fortifications and defences. Clive sails up the Bay of Bengal to the Ganges River to recapture Calcutta: Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 in the Anglo-French Wars in India. The East India Company built up an increasing influence in the area. Bengal was subject to repeated invasions by Afghans and Mahrattas from the north and west and the Company's substantial financial contributions to the defence of the area were important to each Nawab, who ruled Bengal.

In 1689, the East India Company withdrew from the Hugli to Madras, due to the excessive demands of the Nawab of Bengal, Shaista Khan. The following year the Nawab's successor, Ibrahim Khan, persuaded the company to return. The new settlement was established on the Hugli River, but further south, in a group of villages near the site of Calcutta. The equivalent French and Dutch companies were already established on sites further up the Hugli River, the French at Chandranagar. On 19th June 1756, Siraj-ud-Daulah with a large army captured Calcutta after a four-day siege (the war with the British became known as the Third Carnatic War and was to lead to British domination of Bengal).

### **Objective:**

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Battle of Plassey** was a decisive victory of the British East India Company/ Western Powers over the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies on 23 June 1757, under the leadership of Robert Clive, which was possible due to the defection of Mir Jafar.

### **The Black Hole of Calcutta:**

That night the incident took place, subsequently known as the 'Black Hole of Calcutta'. Traditionally, it is claimed that 123 of 146 prisoners from the captured British garrison and their families, held in the hole, died during the night, due to the heat and the number of persons in a cell designed for 2 or 3 prisoners. The figure was computed by John Holwell, a survivor, and is disputed. It seems clear that Siraj-ud-Daulah did not directly cause the detention of the prisoners in the cell and that he ordered the release of the survivors the next morning. Bribed Indians providing water to the prisoners in the Black Hole: Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 in the Anglo-French Wars in India: picture by Richard Caton Woodville Bribed Indians providing water to the prisoners in the Black Hole: Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 in the Anglo-French Wars in India: picture by Richard Caton Woodville Many of the garrison escaped from Calcutta on board English ships and sailed down river to Fulda, to await the arrival of a relieving force from Madras.

### **The Re-capture of Calcutta**

News of the loss of Calcutta reached Madras on 15th July 1756 and a force under Major Kilpatrick was dispatched to Fulda, at the mouth of the Hugli in Bengal. A Royal Navy squadron was present in the Bay of Bengal, commanded by Vice Admiral Watson. The Company authorities at Madras resolved to send as many of the troops and ships at their disposal to retake Calcutta, in spite of the imminence of hostilities with the French, who were present in strength in Southern India. It took some time to assemble the military force and decide that it was to be commanded by Robert Clive, the fleet being commanded by Admiral Watson. The fleet sailed on 16th October 1756 for the Hugli River. The ships arrived at Fulda between 11th and 20th December, other than the Marlborough, which arrived at the end of January 1757 and the Cumberland which was forced south and went aground, finally arriving in mid-March 1757. Once Clive landed in Bengal, Siraj-ud-

Daulah's main force left Calcutta. The small garrison left behind surrendered to Clive on 2nd January 1757. On 9th January 1757 Clive captured the town of Hugli. After re-occupying Calcutta, Clive disposed of a force of some 900 European soldiers, 1,200 sepoys and around 15 guns.

Siraj-ud-Daulah resolved to attack Calcutta again. For this operation, he raised an army said to have comprised 18,000 cavalry, 25,000 infantry and 40 guns. He marched on Calcutta, arriving at the edge of the Mahratta Ditch, a defensive work giving protection to the settlement, on 3rd February 1757. On 4th February 1757, Clive attacked Siraj-ud-Daulah's camp. He intended a night attack, but being delayed, Clive attacked in a thick fog in the early hours of the morning. The fog lifted, revealing Clive's small force in the middle of the camp. Clive fought his way out, leaving Siraj-ud-Daulah so intimidated by the aggressive assault that he withdrew. On 9th February 1757, Siraj-ud-Daulah signed a treaty restoring to the Company its former privileges and agreeing to hand over the property looted in the capture of Calcutta and Cossimbazar. Capture of Chandranagar by Admiral Watson and Robert Clive: Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 in the Anglo-French Wars in India: picture by Dominic Serres. Soon after the signing of the treaty between the East India Company and Siraj-ud-Daulah, news reached the English in India from Europe of the outbreak of war between England and France. This posed a considerable dilemma. Clive was under orders to return to Madras with his army. This would leave Calcutta at the mercy of a combination between Siraj-ud-Daulah and the French. Clive resolved to act decisively before leaving Bengal for Madras.

For Clive, the obvious course was to attack and destroy the French settlement at Chandranagar (now Chandernagore). This would be a provocation to Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab, as all the foreign settlements were under his protection and warfare between them could only be conducted with his permission. Siraj-ud-Daulah needed the French in Bengal as a counter balance to the increasingly aggressive English. Clive marched on Chandranagar and, after bribing the Nawab's general sent to intervene, took and destroyed the settlement on 23rd March 1757. This action on Clive's part infuriated Siraj-ud-Daulah. He was just twenty years of age. English descriptions of Siraj-ud-Daulah give him as spoilt and inexperienced, in contrast to his adversary Clive, a highly talented and ruthless soldier and statesman. In addition, Siraj-ud-Daulah's realm was constantly threatened with invasion on its western border by the Afghans and the Mahrattas, diverting his resources and attention from his problems with the English in the east. Clive had many years experience of manipulating the Indian leaders against whom he was pitted. From his arrival in Bengal, Clive worked to corrupt Siraj-ud-Daulah's generals and courtiers. As further war became imminent, with the destruction of Chandranagar, Siraj-ud-Daulah could rely fully on only a small number of his senior commanders, with many of the major interests in his capital, Murshidabad, committed to the English.

The one body of troops that Siraj-ud-Daulah would have been able to rely upon fully, Monsieur Law and his French troops, Siraj-ud-Daulah ordered to move 100 miles to the west, to Bhagalpur. After the capture of Chandranagar, Siraj-ud-Daulah and the East India Company Committee in Calcutta exchanged a long series of letters of complaint. During the three months of this correspondence, Siraj-ud-Daulah moved his army to Plassey on the Bhagirathi River, 22 miles south of Murshidabad. His army was commanded by Raja Durlabh Ram and contained a large force led by his uncle by marriage, Mir Jafar Khan. Both these generals were proposing to betray Siraj-ud-Daulah. Clive and the Company Committee in Calcutta chose to take the presence of Siraj-ud-Daulah's army at Plassey as a direct threat to Calcutta. During this time, Clive negotiated a treaty, through the intermediary William Watts, with Mir Jafar Khan, whereby the English would assist Mir Jafar Khan in obtaining the Nawabship of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, in exchange for substantial payments to the Company and its various officers. Many of Siraj-ud-Daulah's senior officers were in support of Mir Jafar Khan in this conspiracy. Under the treaty Mir Jafar

Khan undertook to change sides during any hostilities. During the standoff between Siraj-ud-Daulah and the Company authorities, a letter arrived in Calcutta from the Mahratta Chieftain at Berar, proposing that he should invade Bengal with an army of 120,000 men and fight Siraj-ud-Daulah in alliance with the English. Clive suspected, wrongly, that this letter was a forgery, sent on behalf of Siraj-ud-Daulah to establish what the English intentions were towards him. Acting on that assumption, Clive sent the letter to the Nawab. Siraj-ud-Daulah was appalled at the threat of such an invasion and recalled his army to defend Murshidabad.

### **Account of the Battle of Plassey:**

On 12th June 1757, the remaining troops at Calcutta, with 150 sailors from Admiral Watson's squadron, marched to join Clive's force at Chandranagar. Clive now had 950 European Troops (including 250 men from His Majesty's 39th Foot), 2,100 sepoys, 100 artillerymen, 60 sailors and eight 6 pounder guns and 2 howitzers. Clive marched out of Chandranagar on 13th June 1757, leaving a garrison of 100 men. Arriving on 16th June at Palti, Clive sent Major Eyre Coote of the 39th Foot with a small force to take the post of Katwa, containing an Indian garrison and a considerable quantity of supplies. The garrison surrendered to Coote after a token resistance. As Clive and his army approached Siraj-ud-Daulah's camp, the correspondence with Mir Jafar Khan became less than satisfactory, leaving Clive to wonder whether Mir Jafar Khan would in fact comply with the obligations set out in the secret treaty and betray Siraj-ud-Daulah. If he did not, the likelihood was that Clive's army would be overwhelmed in any battle. Clive halted the advance at Katwa and wrote to the Committee in Calcutta, asking for their advice as to whether to proceed with the advance. This was an unusual show of hesitation in Clive, normally impetuous to the point of rashness. That evening, after writing to the Rajah of Burdwan, asking him to join his army with a thousand horsemen, Clive held a Council of War with all his officers. The question discussed and put to the council for a vote was whether the army should continue to advance or stay at Katwah, until the intentions of the traitors in Siraj-ud-Daulah's camp became clearer. The majority of the officers were for staying put. Major Eyre Coote, the hotheaded Queen's officer of the 39th Foot and a minority of the younger officers were for pressing ahead with the attack. Clive voted with those advocating caution. Coote urged that a delay would enable Monsieur Law to join Siraj-ud-Daulah from Bhagalpur with his French troops, known to have been urgently summoned by Siraj-ud-Daulah. The presence of Monsieur Law's force in the opposing army, in addition to strengthening it significantly, was likely to cause the many Frenchmen serving in the East India Company army to desert to their own side. On hearing that Clive was halted at Katwah, Siraj-ud-Daulah rushed his force forward to occupy the camp at Plassey, an established post for his army. After the Council of War, a further letter reached Clive from Mir Jafar Khan, confirming that in the event of battle he would join the English against Siraj-ud-Daulah. Clive immediately changed his mind and the army marched. At 1am on 23rd June 1757, the army reached Plassey, a small village with a hunting lodge owned by the Nawab, Siraj-ud-Daulah. The army bivouacked in a mango grove beyond the village, placing vedettes around the grove. The Company's troops could hear distant military music. The camp of Siraj-ud-Daulah's large army was within earshot, about a mile up the river. Clive sent a party to occupy the hunting lodge. The mango grove, in which the English army encamped, was 800 yards long and 300 yards wide, and contained regular rows of mango trees. Around the grove was a ditch and an embankment. Siraj-ud-Daulah's army comprised 35,000 foot soldiers, most poorly armed and lacking formal discipline. His cavalry was around 15,000 horsemen, mostly Pathans from the North-West, well mounted, armed with swords and spears. All skilled and experienced riders.

Siraj-ud-Daulah's artillery comprised 53 cannon, all of heavy calibre; 32, 24 and 18 pounders. Guns of this size, more usually deployed in fixed position siege work, were not ideal for use on the battlefield, being cumbersome, slow to load and difficult to move. The heavy ammunition could not be easily carried with the guns in sufficient quantity for a battle. Siraj-ud-Daulah's gunners attempted to deal with these various problems by mounting the guns on enormous wooden trucks, towed by oxen and pushed by elephants. The guns were apparently fired from these platforms. It is likely that the rate of fire will have been even slower than on the ground, with each discharge and heavy recoil damaging the wooden structures and terrifying the animals, particularly the elephants, notoriously unreliable in battle and dangerous to their own side.

On the battlefield, a ball from a 32 pounder gun would do little more damage than one from a 6 pounder. Indian gunners were not well drilled and produced a slow rate of fire, taking, according to Malleon, around fifteen minutes to fire each round, as against 2 or 3 rounds a minute for European gunners (this is partly explained by the disparity in the size of the guns that each side deployed). Locally manufactured, the Indian guns lacked modern refinements such as elevating screws, making it near impossible to aim the guns with any accuracy from the wooden trucks. In spite of the large number of guns, it seems likely that Siraj-ud-Daulah's artillery was of little assistance to his army. It seems to have inflicted few casualties on Clive's army. Supervising the Indian gunners and working a few smaller calibre field guns themselves (see the illustration of a captured French gun) were 40 or 50 Frenchmen, retained from Monsieur Law's force, all deeply resentful at Clive's destruction of the French settlement at Chandranagar and commanded by Monsieur St Frais. The French troops with 4 cannon occupied the mound around the larger tank, about half a mile from the English army. Between the larger tank and the river were 2 heavy guns manned by Indian gunners. Behind these guns stood Mir Madan Khan, described as Siraj-ud-Daulah's sole faithful commander, with 5,000 cavalry and 7,000 foot soldiers, all described as the pick of Siraj-ud-Daulah's army.

Clive watched the deployment of Siraj-ud-Daulah's troops from the roof of the Plassey hunting lodge. As Mir Jafar Khan's troops extended around the mango grove, outflanking his troops and finally threatening their rear, he must have wondered what would happen if the traitors betrayed him instead of their Nawab. Contrary to the usual Indian practice of placing artillery together, Siraj-ud-Daulah's guns were dispersed along his line in twos and threes.

Both armies were in place by 8am. The French, under St Frais, fired the first gun, which acted as a signal for the opening of a heavy bombardment all along the line of Siraj-ud-Daulah's army. The Indian line was enveloped in a cloud of powder smoke. The English guns returned the fire and inflicted considerable damage on Siraj-ud-Daulah's troops. Clive could not afford even the few casualties caused by the French and Indian gunfire. At the end of half an hour and with 30 casualties Clive pulled his line back behind the mound along the perimeter of the mango grove. The troops and guns posted in the brick kiln and the men in the hunting lodge remained in position.

## Conclusion

Clive's men were now in cover. They dug embrasures in the mango grove mound for their guns to fire through, while Siraj-ud-Daulah's cannon caused havoc only among the mango trees, firing over the heads of the English soldiers concealed behind the mound.

English six pounder gun at the Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 in the Anglo-French Wars in India: picture by Richard Caton Woodville. Clive's guns resumed their fire with considerable effect, killing Indian gunners and causing supplies of their ammunition to explode, generating panic among the draft animals and clouds of powder smoke. Soon after the council ended a heavy rainstorm came on, continuing for an hour. The English troops were used to campaigning in a country where the monsoon had such an impact. They produced tarpaulins and covered the artillery ammunition to keep it dry. Siraj-ud-Daulah's artillery did not have tarpaulins and much of their powder was ruined by the rain and rendered unusable. Their fire fell away. Following the Battle of Plassey, in accordance with the treaty he had signed with Clive and the East India Company Committee in Calcutta, Mir Jafar Khan entered Murshidabad with Clive and became Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It was however largely an empty honour as the real power in Eastern India was now the English East India Company. Under the treaty, Mir Jafa Khan was compelled to pay substantial sums of money to the East India Company and also to Clive and the Company and Royal officers of his army and the Royal Navy squadron of Vice Admiral Watson that supported the land operations. All these men were enriched by these payments. Those who survived to return to England, Watson and Kilpatrick, and the several others who died soon after Plassey from infectious disease brought on by the oppressive climate became known as 'Nabobs' from their India derived wealth.

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