

# The Battle Of Plassey As A Revenge Tragedy

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By Arup K Chatterjee

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**The well-known Battle of Plassey, which was fought in 1757, has been described as the 'war that defined modern India.' Legends from the battle continue to emanate from West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh. This piece explores the intricate roles of Omichund, Jagat Seths, Ghaseti Begum and the Armenians. We have added a character arc as an interactive with this piece. Please do check.**



THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY.

Representational image (Getty Images Photo)

On the afternoon of July 2, 1757, the last “independent” Nawab of Bengal, Sirajudaulah (the maternal grandson of the late Nawab Alivardi Khan) was stabbed in a morbid dungeon of the Jaffarganj Palace. Located along the east bank of the ebbing Hooghly river, skirted on both sides by idyllic groves of palms, banyans and mango, the palace witnessed the young Nawab casting his exhausted eyes one last time upon his assassin — Mohammady Beg—before he broke into his final prayer. Soon, the hatchet did its work. And Alivardi Khan’s son-in-law, Nawab Mir Jaffar, the sponsor of this execution, went down in history as one of the greatest traitors—although *almost* unfairly.

### **Anticolonial Sentiments**

Indian and Bangladeshi anticolonial sentiments attached to the Battle of Plassey become more comprehensible in the light of the sheer opulence of Bengal in the eighteenth century. William Dalrymple remarks that “Bengal’s revenues had risen by 40 percent since the 1720s- and one single market in Murshidabad was said alone to handle 65,000 tons of rice annually.” Hence, the South Asian imagination of the battle generally revolves around an episode of gruesome anticolonial revenge—the alleged “Black Hole of Calcutta” (June 20, 1756). According to colonial and survivor accounts, about 120 Europeans died of claustrophobia in a dungeon in the Fort William, where they were packed by Siraj’s men, reportedly on his orders. But what is striking is that near Siraj’s final breath, he attributed his end to the “revenge” of Husayn Quli Khan, the nephew and son-in-law of Alivardi Khan. Husayn was also the forgotten lover of Siraj’s eldest maternal aunt, Ghaseti Begum. The Begum could not avert the murder of her paramour by Siraj’s men in 1755. Two years later, the destiny of Bengal and of India was to be decided on the infamous battlefield of Plassey.

### **The Takeover**

On June 23, 1757, the Battle of Plassey saw the bewilderingly absurd takeover of Bengal by Robert Clive’s army, comprising about 3,000 (9 cannons, 200 Topasses, 900 Europeans, 2,100 sepoy) faced against a Bengal army that was twenty-times stronger, comprising about 50,000 infantry, 15,000 cavalry, soldiers, 300 cannons and 300 elephants. George Bruce Malleson, in *The Decisive Battles of India* (1885), styled Plassey as the most inglorious English victory. It was “Plassey which,” he remarked, “gave to the sons of her middle-classes the finest field for the development of their talent and industry the world has ever known ... the conviction of which underlies the thought of every true Englishman.” Plassey also unmasked South Asia’s internal slanderous plots and inequities. As George Alfred Henty, wrote in 1894, “manner in which the unhappy youth was alternately cajoled and bullied to his ruin, the loathsome treachery in which those around him engaged with the connivance of the English, and lastly the murder in cold blood, which Meer Jaffier, our creature, was allowed to perpetrate, rendered the whole transaction one of the blackest in the annals of English history.”

## What It Stands For

More recently, Manu Pillai has described Plassey as the “war that defined modern India.” Legends from that battle, that continue to emanate from Bengal, India, and Bangladesh, can become the leitmotifs of tragedies rivalling the *Mahabharat* at its most epic and macabre; it can also inspire a Marquez to pen another *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. One may even add a grisly Francis Ford Coppola “family” saga to that inventory. For, Plassey is one of the grimmest examples, in modern recorded history of the episodic impulses of South Asians defying the good of their own imagined community to betray the reins of statecraft to Machiavellian interests.

## British Raj Going Strong

The Battle of Plassey may seem like an overtold saga, most recently in an eponymous book by Sudeep Chakravarti (2020) and the reprinted edition of Brijen K. Gupta’s classic, *Sirajuddaulah* (1966; 2020). Siraj’s defeat led to the East India Company receiving a sum of about Rs 23 million, as damages, besides close to Rs 6 million as cash presents, and Clive himself pocketing a fief of Rs 300,000. Fifteen years later, this amount and his other receipts from the conquest impelled him to asseverate before a British Parliamentary committee, “Mr. Chairman, at this moment, I stand astonished at my moderation.” Between 1757 and 1765, the Company’s factors exploited the political instability of Bengal to reap profits more than Rs. 20 million, while the Company grew richer by Rs 100 million, not to mention the establishment of a British mint in Bengal and the diminution of bullion imports—that amounted to over Rs 70 million before the battle—into Bengal. The monopolization of saltpetre—the principal ingredient of gunpowder—and, besides an annual profit of Rs 300,000 on its trade, its key role in British predominance over the Dutch and French in the subsequent decades, was another direct corollary of the battle.

## Heroes And Villains

Finally, the English company’s dexterity at pitting Siraj against his uncle Mir Jaffar, and Jaffar against the latter’s son-in-law Mir Qasim, heralded a series of strategic victories against Shah Alam II of Delhi, Shujaudaulah of Oudh, and later the Marathas (who, back in the eighteenth century, were armed to repel the advancing armies of Ahmad Shah Abdali). The granting of the Diwani of Bengal to the company, in 1765, parted the province in terms of its economic and military benefits, making it the perfect launching ground for the project of colonization. The Battle of Plassey occurred during the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) involving European powers, most prominently the French and British, who extended it to their Indian conflicts in the Carnatic and Bengal. For nationalist historians like Jadunath Sarkar, the English victory at Plassey marked the onset of Bengal’s “Renaissance”—a view also shared by Rabindranath Tagore’s industrialist ancestor—Dwarkanath Tagore. Imperialist historiography, says Rudrangshu Mukherjee, has been “prone to depict Sirajudaulah as a reckless villain,” given to mindless plunder. Clive’s conspiracy with powerful bankers like the Jagat Seths (nicknamed the Rothschilds

of India), merchants like the Khatri Sikh Omichund, and Mir Jaffar and Mir Qasim, may be wrongly interpreted as a tale of heroes and villains. And such an interpretation could exclude the impact of two very powerful entities.

### **Puppet And Puppeteer**

First was Ghaseti Begum and the complex though substantial powers she wielded in the court of Murshidabad. If the logic of per capita accountability was applied in the entire plot against Siraj, Mir Jafar would not appear to have had the strongest agency. Rather, the greater per capita agency would rest with or at least be shared by the Jagat Seths and Ghaseti Begum. Jafar came to be held responsible for the betrayal of Siraj as he was closest to him and, unlike the other conspirators, he received the Company's protection after Plassey. Ghaseti Begum, who acted in her interest of avenging the death of her lover, was instrumental in instigating Mir Jafar. Since she could not fight on the battlefield, she used Jafar as the puppet, both in averting Siraj's plans of allying with the French and in, eventually, helping Clive's advance against the Bengal army.

### **The Lobbies**

Second were the Armenians who had helped the British convalesce and consolidate, since the incident of the Black Hole. Being a trading community, that fled persecution in Persia and began settling in India since the 16th century, particularly in Surat and Murshidabad. The Armenians of Bengal were instrumental in gathering intelligence for the British and replenishing their troops with ration and garrison. Besides, being traders and usurers, they also had insight into the sentiments of the local populace. This enabled them to lobby the courtiers of Murshidabad, and commander Jafar, to believe that the tide was against Siraj, and that the dynasty was marked for an imminent rebellion. Khoja Wajid, the Bengal merchant who supported Clive, was later arrested on suspicion of allegiance to the French. And Khoja Petrus Aratoon, an ally of the English Company, may well have gone on to succeed Mir Qasim as the Nawab of Bengal, but for his assassination in 1763.

### **The Malaise**

There is some rationalization as to why Mir Jaffar's name has become synonymous with traitorhood and that theme irrefutably undergirds the tale of Plassey. However, the intricate roles of Omichund, Jagat Seths, Ghaseti Begum and the Armenians still beg to desire a more complex narration of the epic battle and the threshold to colonial rule. It was, perhaps, not so much the prolonged malaise but the malignant symptom of what Bengal once experienced, and India later recognized.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Arup K Chatterjee

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