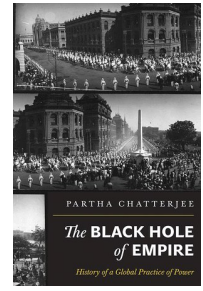
The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power, by Partha Chatterjee



Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012 | xiv + 425 pages | ISBN: 978-0-691-15200-4 (hardcover) $80.00 | ISBN: 978-0-691-15201-1 (softcover) $29.95 | ISBN: 978-1-400-84260-5 (ebook)

Despite its claimed identity as history, as per the subtitle, Chatterjee's *Black Hole* is, more appropriately, a sophisticated *ākhyāikā* or *ākhyān* [story or saga], or a desert romance, recounting the lurid lore of the "City of Dreadful Nights" and the depredations of the white Alibaba Sabut Jang (Clive) and his near-forty thieves (the conspirators of Murshidabad), and the tragic saga of the plight of the Mysore Abhimanyu encircled by the greedy white *kāfirs* and their native lackeys assembled by the land-grabber imperialist Richard

Wellesley. The narrative is interspersed with some very competent theoretical *excursus* on modernity, imperialism, colonialism, and postcolonialism, tagged with copious endnotes, and topped by a massive bibliography—yet altogether neither a straight regular history nor a variety of history in alternative historical style, but an instance of what may be considered a classic piece of liminal (postmodernist?) history. The *mêlange* of contents of the narrative (with the sole exception of its *leitmotif* the "black hole" scandal) comprises a heady mix: Siraj-ud-daula, Tipu Sultan, Wajid Ali, Girish Ghosh, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa's *bhairab* devotee, Nabin Sen, Akshay Maitreya, John Little, Rammohan, Bentham, the two Mills, Fazlul Huq, Mohammedan Sporting and Mohun Bagan Clubs, Bengali terrorists, bombs and (its oversized but non-lethal look-alike) football, sovereignty, and "empire." This potpourri of people, plot, providence, play (both theatrical and athletic), and patriotism and historiography is intended to substantiate and support the author's stated theme (or thesis) of "local history" centered on Fort William and that of a "grand narrative" dealing with the birth of the British Empire in Black Hole, thus heralding British imperialism in India, its demise in space but its conceptual (spiritual?) continuance through the postcolonial and postmodern period.

As Chatterjee is not writing a historical account but relating a saga, as well as its historiography, he abjures the "role of the all-knowing author-as-historian" (reminiscent of the boring [*ekghṅeye*] pedant as Girish Ghosh's guru, the semi-literate temple priest Ramakrishna Paramahamsa of Dakshineshwar used to quip), and assumes that of "poets and chroniclers of old" (xii) or a storyteller, *à la* Hayden White, Alun Munslow, or Beverly Southgate. Perhaps he internalizes unwittingly Nabin Sen's plea "that the poet's path [is] smooth and unencumbered by historical facts" (246). Needless to mention, Chatterjee excels in his preferred role famously. One of the redeeming features of his oppressively long narrative is undoubtedly its impressive, elegant, and enticing prose much like the *Bānglā* of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay. There are also excellent and entertaining discussions on Rammohan, Bentham, Ihtishamuddin, Abu Taleb, Girish Ghosh, Nabin Sen, and Akshay Maitreya, as well as the theory, history, and historiography of imperialism and nationalism.

As an historical monograph, however, Chatterjee's book falls short of being either persuasive or reliable, especially in respect of his treatment of the character and conduct of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula and of the self-styled Padshah Tipu Sultan. These two topics suffer most from pitifully skewed references.

Relying uncritically on the manifestly prejudiced researches of a bunch of patriotic, postcolonial, postmodernist, and condescending Indian and Western authors, Chatterjee unwittingly abandons his former critical (often provocative) original and creative scholarship and lets himself be swept away by the frivolous *dicta* of the former. He is nonchalantly oblivious of scores of studies on every aspect of the history and culture of colonial India, especially Bengal in particular, mostly in Bengali, and some in English, belonging neither to the camp of anti-imperialist crusading scholars nor to the party of cultural indigenists (my euphemism for the British bashers). The distinguished author has devoted pages on the patently patriotic representation of Alivardi's grandson, a veritable *alaler gharer dulal* or a spoilt brat from an indulgent Pathan household, depicted by Girish Ghosh, Akshay Maitreya (Chatterjee makes him a "positivist" historian with arguments that would make poor Leopold turn in his grave), and Nabin Sen but shied away from mining the works of contemporary and later chroniclers, *testes oculis*, and historians such as Mir Hussein Kirmani, Jean Law, Luke Scrafton, Alfred Lyall, Abdul M. Khan, Kalikinkar Datta, Iris Macfarlane, Rajat Ray (works other than *Palashir Sadayantra*, especially his *The Felt Community*, 2001), and lastly, this reviewer (Narasingha Sil, "An Anatomy of Colonial Penetration and Resistance in the Eighteenth Century: the Odyssey of Siraj-ud-daula and Tipu Sultan," 2005).

Similarly, the chapter on Tipu suffers from the author's excessive reliance on and extensive use of a number of favorable and fanciful assessments of the Sultan by such adoring scholars as, *inter alia*, Kate Teltscher, Maya Jasanoff, Linda Colley, Janaki Nair, Sheikh Ali, and Abdus Subhan. Unbeknownst to the author there exist a few unorthodox accounts that effectively interrogate Tipu's crypto-hagiographical historiography which might have been overlooked by the professor's team of research assistants (see Hayavadana Rao, *History of Mysore*, 3 vols, 1948, Hari Dayal Sharma, 1991, and Narasingha Sil, "Tipu Sultan: A Re-Vision," 2008; admittedly the last mentioned renegade study reappeared in a vastly improved form as "Tipu Sultan in History: Revisionism Revised," 2012, too late to be noted).

Chatterjee's enterprise of historicizing Siraj's Black Hole and Tipu's mechanical toy as the signifiers of imperial mythology of oriental inhumanity and colonial "national" power of symbolic terror to the metropolitan cowards is hype at best and hysteria at worst. The Black Hole episode was a scandal, though not of the ideological racial magnitude associated with L'affaire Dreyfus (1894–1906) of Republican France. The mystery and controversy surrounding the mishap of the Fort William prison cell has long been put to

rest and, as even Chatterjee notes, it does not feature in the index of *The New Cambridge History of India* (1987) authored by the "preeminent" P. J. Marshall (336). One would have expected the author to dwell a little more on Lal Behary Day's objection to the fracas in the mango grove being treated as a subject for a national epic since "it reflects no lustre on the Bengali nation" (375 n. 47) *pace* Nazul Islam's patriotic phantasmagoria in his wildly popular poem "*Kāṇḍārī Huṅśiār*" (May 22, 1926): "*Kāṇḍārī! Taba sammukhe ai Palāśīr prāntar, Bāṅālīr khune lāl hala yethā Clāiber khaṅjar*" ["Helmsman! Yonder lies the field of Plassey where Clive's dagger was stained in the Bengali blood"].

Tipu Sultan has successfully leapt into legend from history after the bicentenary anniversary in 1999 of his alleged "martyrdom" in 1799 and thus there appeared a spate of studies since, some purporting to offer a balanced judgment on his policies and actions and a plethora of encomia both in print and in the internet. The irrepressible Girish, purveyor of a powerful Siraj myth, has found his counterpart as Tipu's modern mythicizer in Bhagwan Gidwani of Canada. Chatterjee's Europeanized absolutist monarch of Mysore appears to be a carefully crafted scholarly re-presentation of Gidwani's Tipu as a Promethean hero or, to refer to Chatterjee's terms, a tragic Indian "tiger," killed by "the British lion rampant" (99; the heraldic term "rampant," a clever *double entendre*).

Chatterjee rather arbitrarily imposes the Late Renaissance tripartite periodization of European history on the Indian (its indigenous periodization is the ahistorical *jugas* and *kalpas* etc.) and thus makes Tipu Sultan an early modern absolutist monarch. But Chatterjee's idea of the Enlightenment timocracy is also somewhat arbitrary. In his book, *Despotism of China* (1767), the French Physiocrat François Quesnay distinguished between absolute power (that is, despotic power used under law) and arbitrary power (despotic power above or without legal constraint). According to the Physiocrats, despots must govern with the support of public opinion and thus legal despotism, rather than arbitrary despotism relying solely on coercion, had well defined limits, and was based on popular support. In fact Quesnay found the Chinese Emperor (Zhu Yuanzchang, 1328–98) a legitimate despot (see Ma Li, "Legitimacy as a Limit of Absolute Power: The Case of Zhu Yuanzhang," *Journal of Asian History*, 2005). The author also bypasses a number of studies in Enlightened Despotism including, sadly, Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2006).

On the Enlightenment criteria Tipu Sultan has but a slim claim to the status assigned him by Chatterjee. The French historian and publicist Joseph François Michaud, who admired the Sultan's courage and noble intentions, wrote that "Tippoo was surrounded only by his courtiers who praised all his plans and applauded all his fantasies." Major James Rennell observed in 1792 perspicaciously that Tipu "is unquestionably the most powerful of all the native princes of Hindoostan; but the utter detestation in which he is held by his own subjects, renders it improbable that his reign will be long." Major Alexander Allan observed that "it is impossible that Tippoo could have been loved by his people. The Musselmen [sic] certainly looked up to him as the head of their faith; by them, perhaps, his death is regretted but they could not have been attached to him, by affection."

By all counts the Sultan was a regional despot of Mughal India, though neither absolute nor Enlightened. It would be hard to imagine Chatterjee's "early modern absolutist monarch" Tipu to be as self-reflexive as the paradigmatic absolute monarch, the grand *roi soleil* of early modern France, who counseled his five-year old great grandson, the future Louis XV, in his deathbed on August 26, 1715: "Do not follow my example in the matter of wars; endeavor, at all times, to remain at peace with your neighbors, to alleviate … the burdens of your people, a thing which, alas, I was not able to do" (cited in Pierre Gaxotte, *Louis the Fifteenth and His Times*, tr. J. Lewis May, 1934, 13).

Another shortcoming of this deftly crafted study is its crypto-theoretical foundation that, for lack of a better expression, may be considered (in my coinage) metatheoretical. In my reckoning, Chatterjee's multivalent thesis amounts to something like this: "imperial practices since the eighteenth century involved … an assumption of formal equality between sovereign entities that could acquire or surrender territories and other privileges" (337). However, Chatterjee's endeavor to imbricate the British Indian Empire into the Western imperial system has the effect of missing out on the tree while viewing the jungle. The career of British imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took an entirely separate course. Ever since the Norman Conquest of Anglo-Saxon England in the late eleventh century, the relationship between Anglo-Norman England and France had been on a diplomatic see-saw, waxing now and waning next, until Louis XIV's conquest of the Netherlands led ultimately in 1756 to a Diplomatic Revolution bringing England and Prussia closer.

This Anglo-Prussian alliance would degenerate into a muted rivalry between the two races following the founding of the German nation under Prussian leadership. The British upper class, that is mainly the upper bourgeoisie, used a racial theory based on the rising sciences of phrenology, physiognomy, and craniometry to buttress their superior social position vis-à-vis the decadent but the traditionally respected social superior, the aristocracy, now regarded as effeminate. Claiming their Teutonic racial origin, the Anglo-Saxon gentleman was depicted as a muscular and athletic outdoor man whose sturdy physique became a marker of his strong moral character. Thus emerged the figure of the sahib in British India, a civilian combining brain and brawn, who despised the English-educated Bengali *babu* as effeminate and effete, while by the same token, the English along with the French came to be derided by the Germans as unmasculine (Elizabeth M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj c. 1800–1947* [2001]; Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* [1995]). Chatterjee writes: "By the nineteenth century … the quality of sovereignty that demanded the recognition of formally equal status … became restricted to certain states of Europe and the Americas … The formal equality of proper sovereign states ruled out the use of imperial practices of power in their mutual relations; they could only be employed in relations with inferior political entities. This was the normative European states system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so lauded by conservative theorists such as [Carl] Schmitt" (337). This generalization ("theory") cannot explain the Austro-Prussian or the Franco-Prussian wars (which are examples of "imperial" practices).

In the final analysis, Chatterjee's *magnum opus* exudes a version of academic power, power of exclusion (from his very selective list of references), ironically quite analogous to what he refers to as imperial prerogative of exception (343). No wonder, he has arbitrarily excluded a number of recent studies on the print culture of Renaissance Bengal (for references to some leading works on this topic see Narasingha P. Sil, *The Babu of Colonial Calcutta* (2009), especially 12–17) and more egregiously, the valuable works on old Calcutta by Benoy Ghosh, Shripantha (Nikhil Sarkar), Jaladhar Mallik, Pramathanath Mallik, Harihar Seth or Baidyanath Mukhopadhyay, just to name a few. He has made an elaborate use of some popular plays on Sirajud-daula but excluded the one on Tipu Sultan by an Englishman, Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor. On the topic of the British Empire, the book's best section, several studies are excluded, including Carol Breckenridge and Pe-

ter van der Veer, eds. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (1993), Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire* (1997), Prabhat Patnaik, *Whatever Happened to Imperialism and Other Essays* (2001), Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain* (2004), Duncan Bell, "Historiographical Reviews: Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought," (2006), David Cannadine, ed., *Empire: The Sea and the Global History: Britain's Maritime World 1763–1833* (2007), and Stuart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire 1815–1914* (2008). Also missing is Daniel Philpott's *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (2001).

The book bears the imprint of a prestigious academic powerhouse, Princeton University, and its author belongs to a cabal of what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "comprador intelligentsia … who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" ("Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial," 1991, 348). Indeed Professor Chatterjee holds simultaneous positions at the Department of Anthropology (he has a PhD in Political Science from Rochester) of Columbia University and the Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences of Kolkata. His work under review here has already received some powerful nods of approval, one of them being from another South Asian scholar of his stature, Gyan Prakash, who has hailed *The Black Hole of Empire* as the author's "most ambitious book yet" in which "we encounter a historian at the top of his game" of "challenging existing understandings, reinterpreting the meaning of well-known events, and displaying an authoritative knowledge of an astonishing range of scholarly literature" ("A Return to the Black Hole: Partha Chatterjee's treatise on the Flawed Legacy of Empire," 2012. http://www.caravanmagazine.in/books/return-black-hole).

It may not be quite fair to focus on the "flawed legacy" (whatever that means) of the British Empire in India thus ignoring its lasting and, in the long run, beneficial legacy of India's Western contact and impact. One of the principal markers of civilized life is, as Rabindranath Tagore believed, "self-reflexivity" or in other words "cultural literacy," the faculty of looking into one's own culture with a view to discarding the barren baggage of prejudices and fetishes demanding unquestioning obedience in the name of authenticity and identity and assimilate from outside what is wholesome and praiseworthy. Thus he made an unabashed admission in 1937, during the high noon of Western imperialism: "As people the English, more than the Muslims, are vastly different and distant from us, but as Europe's intellectual

ambassadors the English have come to us as no other foreigners did" (cited in Sil, *Babu*, 24). Earlier, Tagore's predecessor Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "the most powerful intellect" of nineteenth-century India, had admitted that "the English are the greatest benefactor of India" because they were introducing many new ideas, the greatest of which was "love for liberty … [and] … nationalism—something Indians had never been aware of" (ibid., 22).

A little over two decades ago, a distinguished historian of our time wondered in an essay what would have befallen the lot of Calcutta had the English been defeated by the Nawab of Bengal. "One might ask, indeed," Rajat Kanta Ray wrote with alacrity and perspicacity, "if the settlement would have grown into the city of dreadful nights. But then the town might not have seen a Rammohun Roy or bred a Rabindranath Tagore" (cited in Sil, "Odyssey of Siraj-ud-daula and Tipu Sultan," 85n151). It is common knowledge that "the nationalist fighters and writers of the late Bengal Renaissance or of the early twentieth century were … the beneficiaries of the legacy of Young Bengal and Brāhmo Samāj movements and as such they studied Western history and philosophy and admired Western rationalism and nationalism (though not its alliance with imperialism). Their demand for national independence was grounded squarely in the fundamental notion of freedom and justice that had informed the civilization of their colonial masters. Thus they made their voices heard and their demands understood by the metropolitan power because they had learnt the vocabulary of nationalism. Products of a traditional Persian culture, Nawab Siraj-ud-daula and Tipu Sultan were pitted against the culture and power of Enlightenment Europe. They thus remained a total stranger to their adversaries who must have appeared as much alien to the Indians. As such the two Nawabs' demands betrayed no anti-colonial nationalist ideology but smacked only of their personal feudal concern for power and honor (ibid., 85).

Narasingha P. Sil
Western Oregon University
(Professor Emeritus)