
The Black Hole of Empire
HISTORY OF A GLOBAL PRACTICE
OF POWER

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Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Indian languages are my own.

CHAPTER ONE

Outrage in Calcutta

THE MYTHICAL HISTORY of the British Empire in the East begins in a black hole. In the evolutionary history of stars, the black hole is a theoretical construct. Scientists tell us that most of the black hole's properties cannot be directly observed. When the core matter of a star cools, contracts, and collapses into a black hole, the space-time around it is so sharply curved that no light escapes, no matter is ejected, and all details of the imploding star are obliterated. An outside observer cannot associate any meaningful sense of time with the interior events, and hence, in the absence of any chronological equivalence, no communication could possibly take place with an inside observer, if there were one. Scientists do, of course, infer the existence of black holes from observing disks of dust or hot gas near the cores of stars, but no actual black hole has ever been observed so far.

The Black Hole of Calcutta has a somewhat similar status in the history of modern empires. Where exactly was it located, and what happened inside it? How do we know anything about the place or event? To answer these questions, we will need to excavate many layers of narrative and doctrine that lie buried under our currently fashionable postimperial edifice of the global community of nations.

THE TRAVELS OF A MONUMENT

Dalhousie Square is the heart of the administrative district of Calcutta, a city whose name is now officially spelled, in accordance with the Bengali colloquial form, Kolkata. Like many other colonial landmarks in the city, Dalhousie Square too was renamed in the 1960s. The new name is mostly used as an acronym on buses and traffic signs: Bi-ba-di Bag. In Bengali, it sounds as though the place has been named after parties in a legal dispute. But in its expanded form, the name is Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag, which memorializes three daring young men who, on a winter's day in 1930, walked into the Writers' Buildings and shot dead Lieutenant-Colonel Norman Skinner Simpson, the inspector general of prisons, while he was sitting at his desk in his office. The massive red-brick structure of the Writers' Buildings in fact occupies and dominates the entire northern side of the square, throwing a vast crimson reflection on the

shimmering surface of the pool at the center. The principal ministries of the provincial government are still housed in the Writers' Buildings, as they were in the days when the British ruled India. On the western side of the square stands one of the more distinctive buildings of colonial Calcutta—the General Post Office (GPO)—built in the classical style with Corinthian columns and a Renaissance dome. On a workday, the bustle around the place is overwhelming, with hundreds of people scampering up or down the white marble semicircular flight of stairs leading up to an elegant domed hall, encircled by dozens of counters. On the pavement, along the tall iron railings of the post office, stand innumerable vendors peddling the most disparate array of goods one can imagine, from food to envelopes and pens to lottery tickets. Hundreds of buses and minibuses swerve around the GPO in or out of Bi-ba-di Bag every few minutes, honking frenetically and belching noxious fumes. No one here has the least suspicion that the city has not always been this way. How can one imagine a Calcutta without Dalhousie Square and the GPO?

An attentive visitor, however, may notice a small plaque high up on the GPO's eastern wall. It says, somewhat obscurely: "The brass lines in the adjacent steps and pavement mark the position and extent of part of the south-east bastion of Old Fort William the extreme south-east point being 95 feet from this wall." The brass lines are difficult to find, but along one of the lower steps there is a strip of what looks like wrought iron running southward for a few yards and then coming to an abrupt stop. There is no further clue here as to the mystery of the fort wall.

Just north of the GPO there is another red-brick public building known as the Calcutta Collectorate, and further north, running all the way to the corner of Fairlie Place, there is a grand nineteenth-century structure—the headquarters of the Eastern Railway. Rather incongruously, a modern building from the 1960s stands in between, housing the Calcutta offices of the Reserve Bank of India. The entire northern and western sections of Dalhousie Square have an unmistakable Victorian look—an aesthetic richness that is rudely spoiled, for the purist, by the monumental banality of the Reserve Bank. There was once a less grand nineteenth-century building at that spot, but it was pulled down in the 1960s. It used to be the Custom House.

The street running west out of the square past the GPO leads to the Hugli River. This is Koila Ghat, literally the Coal Wharf. It is said that the name is a corruption of Killa Ghat, which would associate the place with a fort. Leading south from Dalhousie Square is Council House Street, which runs past the yard of St. John's Church, built in 1787 and serving until 1847 as the city's Anglican cathedral. Before its recent renovation, it was in a poor state of repair for a long time. The churchyard has some of the oldest funerary architecture from British Calcutta, including the mausoleum of Job Charnock, who founded the first English settlement at Sutanuti, and the grave of Vice Admiral Charles Watson,

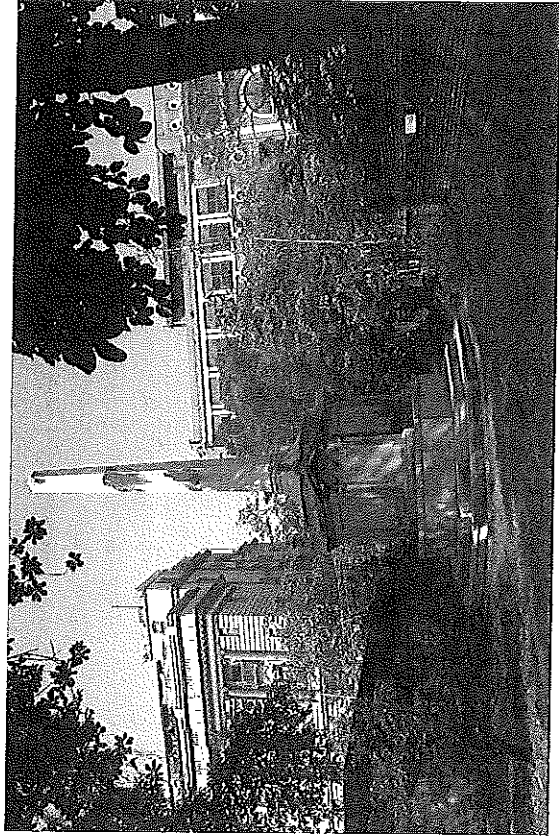


Figure 1. The Holwell Monument at St. John's Church. *Photo: Abhijit Bhattacharya*

who along with Robert Clive (1725–74) led the British reconquest of Fort William in 1757. Both of these structures are remarkable for their distinctly Islamic styles—a sign that local masons at the time had still not been trained to build according to European designs. More interesting for the present purpose, though, is a monument standing near the churchyard's western wall, surrounded by overgrown shrubs and piles of rubbish.

It is a white marble obelisk on an octagonal base, with inscribed tablets on six of its sides and a floral frieze on the other two. The main inscription reads as follows:

This Monument
Has been erected by
Lord Curzon, Viceroy and Governor-General of India,
In the year 1902,
Upon the site
And in reproduction of the design
Of the original monument
To the memory of the 123 persons
Who perished in the Black Hole prison
Of Old Fort William
On the night of the 20th of June, 1756.

The former memorial was raised by
 Their surviving fellow-sufferer
 J. Z. Holwell, Governor of Fort William,
 On the spot where the bodies of the dead
 Had been thrown into the ditch of the ravelin.
 It was removed in 1821.

The next tablet displays the names of twenty-seven persons whom John Zephania Holwell (1711–98) originally listed as having died in the Black Hole. Two other tablets list fifty-four additional victims whose names have been “recovered from oblivion by reference to contemporary documents.”

The memorial is actually in the wrong place, because this is neither the site of the Black Hole prison nor where the victims’ bodies were allegedly thrown. At the base of the monument, there is another inscription:

This Monument was erected in 1902
 by
 Lord Curzon on the original site of the Black Hole
 (North-West corner of Dalhousie Square)
 and removed thence to the Cemetery of
 St. John’s Church, Calcutta in 1940.

We are dealing, then, with two monuments. The original one, by all accounts, stood somewhere on the northwest corner of what was then called the Tank Square, long before James Andrew Ramsay, Lord Dalhousie (1812–60), was memorialized there as an imperial hero. We know from the records that the ruins of the old fort, including the site of the Black Hole prison, were demolished in 1818 when the old Custom House was built. The Holwell monument stood outside the walls of the old fort—that is, somewhere in front of the present Collectorate building.

We also know that the original monument was designed and built, probably in 1760, by Holwell, a survivor of the Black Hole incident, to whom we owe the only detailed narrative of the event. The inscription on the front of the monument then had forty-eight names of those

who with sundry other Inhabitants,
 Military and Militia to the Number of 123 Persons,
 were by the Tyrannic Violence of Surajud Dowla,
 Suba of Bengal, Suffocated in the Black Hole Prison
 of Fort William in the Night of the 20th Day of
 June, 1756, and promiscuously thrown the succeeding
 Morning into the Ditch of the

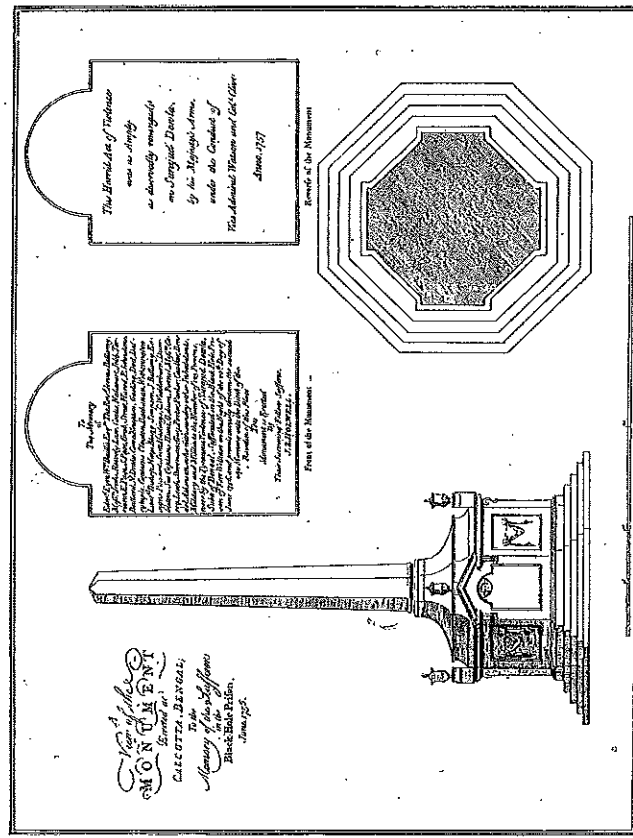


Figure 2. Holwell's plan for his monument and inscription. Source: Holwell 1774, *Frontispiece*

Ravelin of this Place,
 This
 Monument is Erected
 by
 Their Surviving Fellow Sufferer,
 J. Z. HOLWELL.

On the reverse of the monument, the inscription said:

This Horrid Act of Violence
 was as Ample
 as deservedly revenged
 on Surajud Dowla,
 by his Majesty's Arms,
 under the Conduct of
 Vice Admiral Watson and Coll. Clive
 Anno, 1757¹

In 1756, there was no Dalhousie Square, no GPO, and not even the nonexistent Custom House. The entire area from Fairlie Place in the north down to Koila Ghat Street in the south, and from Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag in the east to the Hugli River in the west, which then flowed much further inland than at present, engulfing all of Strand Road, was the location of Fort William, the fortified town that served as the principal settlement of the English East India Company in Bengal. We know this not from any material remains but rather from records preserved in the archives and libraries. Yet to trace the movement of the Black Hole memorial is to unravel the mythical history of empire.

OLD FORT WILLIAM

The center of Calcutta in 1756 consisted of a small fort with earth and ballast bastions and brick walls. It contained the trading hall or factory, warehouses, governor's residence, armory and magazine, barracks, and officers' lodgings of the East India Company. The square bastions at each of the fort's four corners mounted ten guns, and the main east gate had five. The brick curtain walls were about four feet thick and eighteen feet high. Outside the fort, there was a settlement of private British houses, a church, a mayor's court, a hospital, and a playhouse.² The small British population apparently lived ostentatiously in spacious town houses built in the European style, often surrounded by large gardens. The much-larger Indian section of the town was to the north, in what was earlier the village of Sufānūtī, separated from "White Town" by Indo-Portuguese and Armenian quarters, in addition to another settlement toward the south in the village of Gobindapur.

Calcutta had grown phenomenally in the first half of the eighteenth century, and its total population in 1756 could have been in the region of one hundred thousand.³ The British population probably numbered no more than four hundred, mostly male—a large portion of whom were soldiers.⁴ The Indian population residing in "Black Town" consisted of traders, artisans, and laborers who worked or did business in the flourishing trading center called Bara Bazar, or the Great Market, just north of the fort. Some of the Indian merchants of the town, such as Gopinath Seth, Ramkrishna Seth, Sobharam Basak, or the much-maligned Amirchand (called Omichund in the British sources), were major suppliers of the cotton textiles, silk goods, saltpeper, and other commodities exported by the East India Company and its officers. The Seths and Basaks as well as Amirchand owned property in White Town, which they rented to Europeans. Around 1745, there was a concerted attempt to clearly separate White Town from Black Town. After it was reported that "several Black people having intermixed themselves among the English Houses, and by that means occasion Nuisances and disturbances to Several of the English Inhabitants," the order

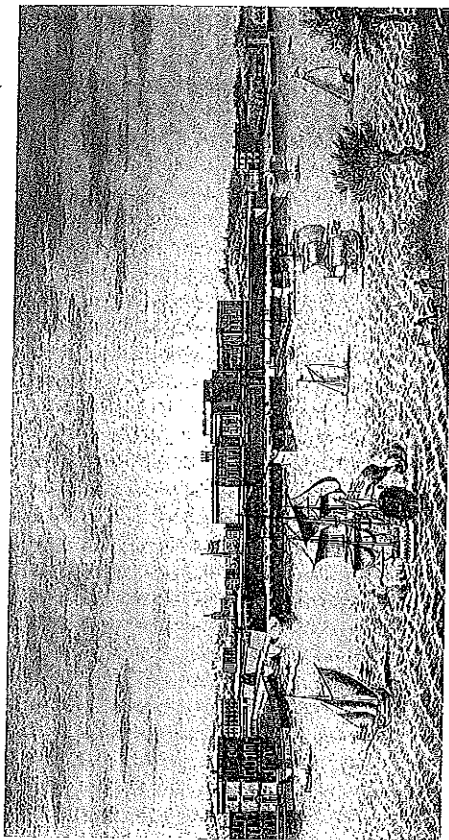


Figure 3. Fort William in the Kingdom of Bengal belonging to the East India Company of England, engraving by Jan Van Ryne, 1754. Source: Curzon 1925

went out that "Black People living in Town" must quit.⁵ This was followed by instructions from London that "Houses belonging to our Servants or any English must not be sold to Moors or any Black Merchants whatsoever."⁶

The company had held the three villages of Suranuti, Kalkatta, and Gobindapur as the zamindar, with the right to settle people and collect revenues, starting in 1698. As with its settlement in Fort St. George in Madras, the English company was keen to encourage a local population to take up residence under its protection, engage in trade and husbandry, and contribute to the revenues.⁷ In 1717, the company secured a *farman* from Emperor Farrukhsiyar of Delhi to trade without paying customs duties, rent thirty-eight villages adjacent to Calcutta, and mint coins out of its imported bullion. Whether these imperial pronouncements were merely advisory, or whether the nawab of Bengal was required to implement them, remained a matter of dispute. Nawab Murshid Quli Khan allowed the company's goods to be transported without duties, but not those that belonged to the company's officials. Company servants, however, routinely tried to carry out their private trade under the company's seal to evade customs charges. Murshid Quli Khan also refused to allow the company to purchase additional villages, but through the early eighteenth century, several villages were actually acquired under the nominal proprietorship of the company's Indian employees.⁸ On the matter of minting coins, the nawab flatly denied permission.

The company's settlement in Calcutta, though, was steadily fortified through the first half of the eighteenth century, sometimes with the permission of the nawab's government, but often without it. The company's directors in London

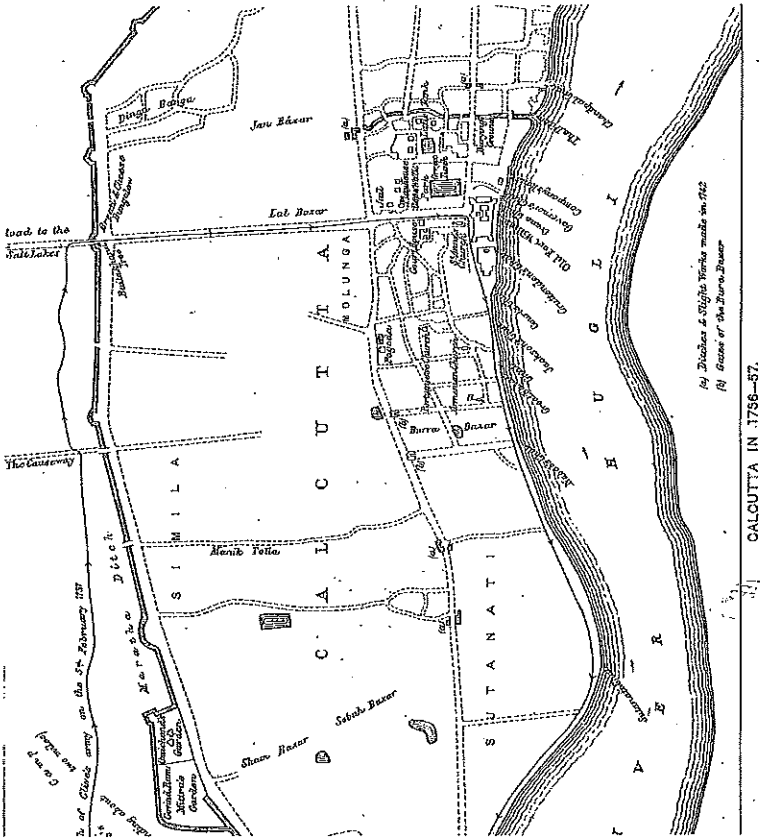


Figure 4. Section of map of Old Fort William and the town of Calcutta, 1756-57.
Source: Busted 1888

were always concerned about the need to defend their settlement in Bengal in order to protect their trade. As early as 1700, they were reminding their officials in Bengal that "we have by every Shipping pressed you to make your fortifications strong enough to discourage or sustaine any attempts of the Moors but in as private a Manner as you can."⁹ The instructions were repeated in 1709:

[Since] the greatest part of our Annual Exports are to the Bay our effort there may be Sufficiently Strengthened and made tenable against any attempts of the Moors though they should have any Europeans among them to direct them in their Assaults and therefore we say take all opportunities to make it so but without noise and as Secretly as you can and be sure colour over your real intentions by alledging that such a building is to keep out the floods or for Additionall Warehouses to preserve goods from fire or to keep the Walls from falling or any other such reasons as the Case requires which may be true in fact tho' they are not the whole truth.¹⁰

The private trade of company officials was a matter of much dispute. There is little doubt that for those who chose to sail to India in the company's service, the lure of a fortune acquired in a few years through private trade was the most powerful attraction, because the actual pay was paltry. Writers were paid £5 a year, factors were paid £15, and senior merchants, after at least a decade of service in India, got £40. The average salary and official perquisites for all company servants, including governors, in the period before the battle of Palashi (spelled in the English sources as Plassey) was under £150 annually.¹¹ Most who came from Britain hated the conditions in Bengal: "They disliked the climate, they disliked the sicknesses that recurred so frequently, they disliked the blacks." But they all looked forward to returning home after ten or fifteen years with enough of a fortune to live "free and independent like a gentleman." This could mean something like £25,000 in savings, which could allow one to live the life of a small squire.¹² Even members of the clergy were not immune. "I am extremely anxious," wrote one young man, "to go as a chaplain on the East India fleet. The stipend is small, only £40, but there are many advantages. The last brought home £3,000."¹³

One variety of private trade, called the "country trade," was the transporting of goods in private British vessels between Indian ports and the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, or China and Southeast Asia. By the 1720s, a large part of India's maritime trade was in private British hands, and Calcutta had overtaken Madras as its principal port. At this time, something like forty private British-owned ships were fitted out from Calcutta each season.¹⁴ It appears that local exporters favored British vessels, mainly because of the speed and dexterity with which they were operated, and the valor with which they were defended. Consequently, Asian traders were prepared to pay the higher freight charges to ensure quick and safe passage.¹⁵ Company officials of all ranks, with the explicit blessings of their seniors, regularly participated in the country trade to make private profits.¹⁶ The directors in London sometimes wrote to their Indian officials to take steps to stop the practice. But the Fort William council responded, "If the Company allowed no private trade, their servants must starve."¹⁷

The other form of private trade was the participation of the company's officials in the "inland" or internal trade in Bengal. Since they had little capital of their own, company servants would take loans from Indian merchants and use their positions of authority in the company to further their private businesses. This could be done either through company employees stationed in inland factories or via Indian *gumasthas* traveling up-country. In 1723, it was reported that the private trade of company servants in Patna was bigger than the company's own business there.¹⁸ A common practice was to use the company permit or *dastak* to clear private goods through the toll stations. Local officials would retaliate from time to time by seizing the company's goods. After protests and haggling, the goods would be released on payment of a penalty. Sometimes, there

would be a face-off, a test of wills. In 1702, when the faujdar (police chief) of Hugli served an order on Calcutta from the nawab's government, the English officials reported to London:

We found the design was to get money from us, but we resolved to part with nothing choosing rather to spend your Honours money in powder and Shott than to be always giving to every little Rascall, who thought he should do us injury, ... we wrote him word we would not be at a Cowreys Charge, but put our selves in a good posture of defence, mounted severall Guns round the Garrison, Entertained Eight or Ten Europe men more in the Gunners Crew, made up the Company of souldiers, one hunder'd and twenty men, and resolved to make a Stout resistance, the Government hearing of our preparations made no attempt upon the place, altho' we were dayly Alarm'd with severall reports of forces coming against us.¹⁹

By 1750, the British position in Bengal became entangled in the extension of European political rivalries in Asia. The aggressive policies of the French governor Joseph François Duplex of Pondicherry had led to major military and diplomatic successes over the British in south India, and now he was looking to Bengal. In 1751, he was writing to his general, Charles Joseph Bussy: "Nothing can be easier than to humble the pride of that man [Nawab Ali Vardi Khan] whose troops are as worthless as those you already know. By sending to Bengal, Balasore or Masulipatam four to five hundred men ... some light artillery ... that is all you need in Bengal where there isn't a single fort and the whole country lies open to the first glance." He added that "the English and the Dutch are not in a position to give him [Ali Vardi] any help.... I defy them to furnish more than three hundred soldiers."²⁰

The British, however, were not slow to pick up the cue. The fiercely competitive spirit of mercantilist rivalry between European nations had long traveled to Asia. In addition, war clouds were looming over Europe. Senior officials of the East India Company were deeply concerned about protecting the future of their lucrative Bengal trade and denying any advantage to the French. Indeed, there is a familiar argument among historians that even though the French were unable to hold on to their initial successes, it was Duplex who first demonstrated that it was possible for a European trading company to seek political power in India to promote its commercial interests; the British only learned this lesson from the French.²¹ The directors wrote to officials at Fort William in 1748:

Experience having proved no Regard is paid by the French to the neutrality of the Mogul's Dominions, and that were the Countrey Government willing to protect Us, they are not able to do it against the French, who having little to lose, are always prone to violate the Laws of Nations to enrich themselves by plunder.... [Y]ou have

our Orders to make Calcutta as secure as You can against the French or any other European Enemy.... His Majesty will support the Company in whatever they may think fit to do for their future Security; for though a Peace is now making with France, no one knows how long it may last, and when War is broke out, it is always too late to make Fortifications strong enough to make Defence against an Enterprising Enemy, as appears from what happened at Madrass.²²

Robert Orme, who would later earn his distinction as the official historian of the conquest of Bengal, was advising Clive as early as 1752 to consider toppling Ali Vardi. "The Nabob coming down with all His Excellency's cannon to Hughley, and with an intent to bully all the Settlements out of a large sum of money; Clive, 'twould be a good deed to swinge the old dog. I don't speak at random when I say that the Company must think seriously of it, or 'twill not be worth their while to trade in Bengal."²³

In December 1752, the company sent out Colonel C. F. Scott as the engineer general to examine and strengthen the fortifications in Calcutta, with special instructions that "keeping our Designs Secret will be the best means of preventing any Troubles and Embarrassments in the carrying them into Execution, which may arise from the Countrey Government."²⁴ In 1754, the company directors in London sent fifty-nine cannons to Calcutta and suggested that the fort be strengthened, with the permission of Ali Vardi, if it could be obtained, and if not, by bribing his officials. Calcutta began to be further fortified in 1755 without the nawab's permission.²⁵

Another matter had often ruffled relations between the provincial government in Murshidabad and the company's settlement in Calcutta. The nawab, needless to say, insisted on his sovereign rights over the territory of the subah of Bengal, including the trading settlements of the French, British, Dutch, and Danish companies. Nevertheless, sometimes there were fugitives who took refuge in Calcutta, and more contentiously, Indian residents of the British settlement or Indian agents of the company over whose property the provincial government made a claim in accordance with the country's prevailing law. The East India Company refused to hand over such persons on several occasions, claiming that it could not "think of subjecting our flag and protection to so much contempt as to abandon our tenants and inhabitants and permit their estates and properties to be seized and plundered."²⁶

Ali Vardi, it seems, was well aware of the economic opportunities that had been opened up in Bengal by the European trade. "He used to compare the Europeans," wrote Luke Sraffon, a company official, "to a hive of bees, of whose honey you might reap the benefits, but that if you disturbed their hive they would sting you to death."²⁷ Ali Vardi was keen to prevent a combination of the British and French against him, and so tried to play one against the other. He also firmly resisted allowing the military fortification of any of the European

settlements in his dominion. According to his admiring historian Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, Ali Vardi was apprehensive that after his death, "the hat-men would possess themselves of all the shores of Hindia."²⁸

A NEW NAWAB

In March 1756, the eighty-year-old Ali Vardi was fatally ill. A power struggle was brewing in his court in Murshidabad. His grandson Siraj-ud-daulah was known to be Ali Vardi's favorite, but his claims were vigorously opposed by Ali Vardi's eldest daughter, Mihr-un-nisa, better known as Gahsiti Begam. At this time, Krishnadas, the son of Rajballabh Sen, the revenue administrator of Dhaka, accused by the nawab's government of embezzlement, took refuge in Calcutta. Rajballabh was a close confidant of Gahsiti. Siraj took this as a signal that the British were backing Gahsiti's faction in the succession battle.²⁹ When Ali Vardi died in April and Siraj became the nawab, he immediately demanded from the company the extradition of Krishnadas and a stop to any further fortification of Calcutta. Narayan Singh, the bearer of the nawab's letter, was unceremoniously dismissed by Roger Drake, the governor of Fort William, who then wrote back to Siraj:

Some enemies had advised His Excellency without regard to truth, that we were erecting new fortifications ... that he must have been acquainted of the great loss our company sustained³⁰ by the capture of Madras by the French, that there was an appearance of a war between our nations, that, therefore, we were repairing our walls which were in danger of being carried away by the river, and that we were not otherwise erecting new works.³⁰

Narayan Singh, humiliated, returned to Murshidabad and complained: "What honour is left to us, when a few traders, who have not yet learnt to wash their bottoms, reply to the ruler's order by expelling his envoy?"³¹ Siraj, by all accounts, was enraged. One group in his court advised caution, reminding him that the English were like "flames of fire" and that confronting them might engulf the whole country in a general war. But another group advocated firm diplomacy backed by a show of force.³² The recent conflicts between the British and French in south India, and the subjugation of the rulers of Hyderabad and Arcot, were known in Murshidabad, and it was reasonable for Siraj to think that he should not allow any of the Europeans to build fortified enclaves in Bengal.³³ In fact, he may even have been keen to nullify the privileges that the British were enjoying in Bengal in comparison with the other European companies and treat all of them on the same footing.³⁴

Khwaja Wajid, an Armenian merchant of Hugli who traded with the English company, was appointed as an intermediary. Siraj explained to him that he objected to the strong fortifications in Calcutta, the misuse of the company's dastak that had resulted in huge losses of revenue, and the protection that the British had given to corrupt employees of the nawab's government. On the question of the dastak, Siraj did not raise the issue of its misuse by company servants but rather its illegal sale to Indian merchants—a practice that was apparently quite common.³⁵ He also wrote to George Pigot, the governor of Fort St. George in Madras, declaring:

It was not my intention to remove the mercantile business of the Company belonging to you from out of the *subah* of Bengal, but Roger Drake, your *gomasta*, was a very wicked and unruly man and began to give protection to persons who had accounts with the *Pattha* [emperor] in his *koatey* [factory]. Notwithstanding all my admonitions, yet he did not desist from his shameless actions.³⁶

Yet Khwaja Wajid's mission came to nothing. Drake would not listen to him and virtually turned him away.

Siraj retaliated immediately. At the end of May 1756, his troops surrounded the English factory in Kasimbazar, not far from Murshidabad, and forced William Watts, the factor, to sign an undertaking pledging that the company would accept the nawab's conditions. None of the company's servants who surrendered were subjected to violence, nor were the company's assets seized. Watts later wrote that "a proof that the Nabob's intent was to accommodate matters, was that he touched none of the Company's effects at Cossimbuzar except the warlike stores."³⁷

Drake in Calcutta, however, decided that the nawab was merely creating pretexts for seizing the company's assets and expelling the British from Bengal. He disregarded the repeated suggestions from Watts that he seek some sort of reconciliation with Siraj. Instead, the council at Fort William wrote to Fort St. George asking for reinforcements to be sent immediately:

We are again to request in the most earnest manner, as you tender the interest of our employers so deeply concerned in this Settlement, as you regard the lives and properties of the inhabitants, and as you value the honour of our Nation, all of which are now at stake, that you do not on any motive whatsoever neglect to supply us with the number of men we have demanded.... Should you after all we have said and urged upon this head either refuse or delay the reinforcement we have demanded, we hope your Honour &c. will excuse us, if we exculpate ourselves by protesting against you in behalf of our Honourable Employers, for all the damages and ill consequences of such default.³⁸

THE FALL OF CALCUTTA

On June 16, the nawab, personally leading a force of some thirty thousand soldiers with heavy artillery, arrived in the vicinity of Calcutta. At Fort William, the number of armed men available to defend it was around five hundred, of whom no more than half were European, including soldiers, militia members, and volunteers, with the rest consisting of Armenians, Indo-Portuguese, and Indians.³⁹

A council of war met at Fort William. It was suggested that the fort alone should be defended and that all the British houses surrounding the fort should be blown up to allow unrestricted fire on the nawab's troops. But the idea was rejected. The prevailing view seems to have been that Siraj would not really go through with his threats in the face of determined opposition from the British.⁴⁰ Instead, to deter the nawab's advance, the bamboo and straw huts of the Indian residents of Gobindapur were set on fire, and then looters plundered Bara Bazar.⁴¹ Drake, the governor, noted later that except for Gobindaram Mitra, a prominent Indian in the company's service, no one in the native part of town offered any help: "They are such a niggardly race of people that we gained no assistance or strength to the place from any of those whose great-grandfathers had enjoyed the protection of our flag under which they accumulated what they are now possessed of."⁴² All European women as well as the families of the Armenian and Portuguese fighters were given shelter in the fort.

The nawab's forces began an assault on all fronts on June 16. After three days of battle, a majority of the council at Fort William was arguing in favor of abandoning the fort and retreating to the ships anchored in the river. The nawab's troops plundered the town "to such an extent that the rabble of the party gave food and water to their beasts in china vessels.... For three or four days," wrote Yusuf Ali Khan, "the servants attached to the Nawab's cavalry and infantry, and the rabbles of the market, numbering about sixty to seventy thousand men, spared nothing in razing and burning, and looting properties worth lakhs and crores."⁴³ Morale was desperately low inside the fort, and as Drake, the fort's governor, himself remarked, "Every black fellow who could make his escape" ran away. Thus, even though there were provisions in the fort, there were no cooks, and Drake, in describing how distressing the situation was, noted that "even the Governour had no servant but one slave boy."⁴⁴ One officer later commented that "animosity amongst the persons who had the whole command and charge of the garrison in their hands did not contribute a little to our misfortunes." There was much unruly behavior and drunkenness among the soldiers: "Half of our men in liquor in the fort, no supply of provisions or water sent to those in the houses without, the drum beat to arms three different times

on alarm of the enemy's being under the walls, but hardly a man could be got on the ramparts."⁴⁵

On the night of June 18, it was decided that the European women in the fort should be escorted to the boats waiting on the river. But crowds of Indo-Portuguese women and children who had been given shelter in the fort pressed forward to get on board: "It was thought hard to refuse them protection, as their husbands carried arms for the defence of the place."⁴⁶ Soon the governor's house and the garrison had been abandoned. When it was discovered that no more than two days' ammunition was left in the stores, there was a demand for a general retreat from the fort. Holwell, in particular, maintained that by retreating to the boats at night, all Europeans as well as the company's treasure could be safely removed before daybreak. No firm decision was reached, though. Amirchand, who had been imprisoned in the fort by Drake on the charge of secretly conspiring with the nawab's party, was asked to write to the nawab seeking terms of negotiation, but Amirchand was in no mood to oblige his captors.⁴⁷ In any case, even the Persian writer employed by the company had deserted.

When the nawab's army resumed its assault in the morning, and the ship *Dodaly* arrived up the river below the fort, there was a general desertion. Everyone who could find a place on a boat left. By noon, Governor Drake himself was gone, sailing downstream. Soon there were no more boats available, even though many, including eight members of the council of war, were still waiting in the fort, ready to leave. The expectation was that the company's ship, *Prince George*, waiting upstream, would arrive shortly to pick up the remaining Europeans. Yet at this critical moment, as ill luck would have it, the ship ran aground and would not move. The defenders were stranded in the besieged fort.⁴⁸

The governor having ingloriously deserted, the remaining council members elected Holwell as governor of Fort William. He promised to distribute three chests of the company's treasure among the soldiers if they could hold the fort. But with so many senior officers gone, it was impossible to maintain discipline. Many European soldiers, most of them allegedly Dutch, virtually ruined, forcing their way into the stores, helping themselves to the liquor, and subsequently deserting in the night.⁴⁹ On June 20, after further fighting, Holwell was left with no more than a 150 fighters, demoralized, and "exhausted of strength and vigour."⁵⁰ He signaled for a truce. By evening, the fort was occupied by the nawab's troops.

Holwell was brought before Siraj, who expressed much resentment against Drake. The Indo-Portuguese, Armenians, and Indians in the fort were allowed to leave, along with some fifteen Europeans. The remaining Europeans were left in charge of the nawab's guard. At this time, according to one account, some

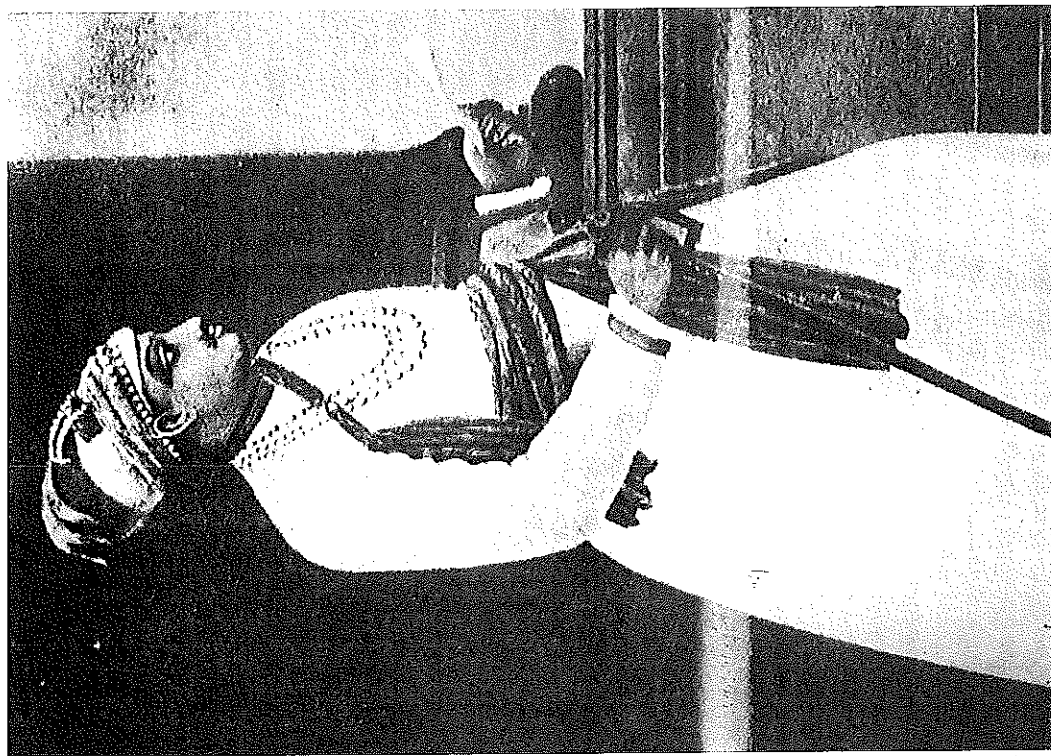


Figure 5. Siraj-ud-daulah, from a contemporary portrait. Courtesy: © Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata

of the Europeans, apparently under the influence of liquor, misbehaved with the guards, at least one of whom received fatal injuries. It appears that some hostilities continued even after the fort had been taken. When this was reported, either the nawab or one of his officers ordered that the Europeans be confined within the fort. In the process, they discovered a cell, picturesquely called the

Black Hole, which was used by fort officials to lock up unruly Europeans. This was where the European prisoners were held during the night of June 20.

THE AFTERMATH OF DEFEAT

To understand the context in which the first narratives of the Black Hole deaths were produced, we have to travel a few miles downstream from Calcutta, opposite what was then the quite-nondescript rural market of Phalta, where there was a Dutch pilot station for guiding ships sailing up or down the treacherous Hugli River. That is where Drake and those of his colleagues who had decamped waited in their boats, to be joined by Watts and Collet from Kasimbazar as well as Holwell and other survivors of the fall of Fort William. For several months, the East India Company representatives in Bengal operated out of *Dodahy*, surrounded by a small flotilla offshore from Phalta.

The situation there was far from edifying. A week after the fall of Calcutta, the Dutch company in Hugli refused to respond to a request from the *Dodahy* for provisions and clothing: "We have viewed with surprise the presumptuous recklessness of that nation in first bidding defiance to such a formidable enemy as the Nawab, and afterwards, after offering little or no resistance, in abandoning their permanent fortress and matchless colony without making any provision for the few things that were absolutely required."⁵¹ The French in Chandannagar (Chandernagore) were merciless in their condemnation of the English: "Their shameful flight ... covers all Europeans with a disgrace which they will never wipe out in this country; every one curses, detests and abhors them.... In short whatever one may say, these gentlemen, especially Mr. Drake, will never free themselves from such an infamy, and Mr. Drake will never be able to deprive his nation of the right to hang him and all his Council."⁵²

The first letter from the council in Phalta to its superiors at Fort St. George, containing the news of Calcutta's fall, did not go out before July 13, more than three weeks after the event, because of difficulties in arriving at an agreed-on version of what had happened.⁵³ When Charles Manningham was chosen to carry this letter to Madras and report in detail, there was a written protest from some in Phalta who charged that Manningham had deserted his post at Fort William and could not be relied on to give a true account of the events there.⁵⁴ Around the same time, Watts and Collet, then in Chandannagar after their release from the nawab's custody, wrote to the council in Phalta, charging: "You incensed the Nabob to come against Calcutta and then deserted the place and fled on board your ships, which in all probability and by all accounts was the occasion of the loss of the place which might have been defended if you had staid, and by which step we are of opinion you abdicated your several stations and are now no longer to be deemed Servants of the Company."⁵⁵

On July 17, Holwell wrote his first letter to Fort St. George from Murshidabad, where he had been taken in custody by the nawab's officers, in which he described the flight of Drake and others as an act of desertion and a "cruel piece of treachery," for which the remaining council members at Fort William had resolved to suspend the deserters, "it being the only just piece of resentment in our power."⁵⁶ William Lindsay in Phalta, on the other hand, writing to Orme in Madras, specifically mentioned Holwell in his report on the fall of Calcutta: "Mr. Holwell after the Governor was gone took the charge of the factory. It was much against his inclination being there, two gentlemen having carried away the *budget* he had waiting for him. I mention this as I understand he made a merit in staying when he found he could not get off."⁵⁷

In early August, after Holwell's arrival in Phalta, the antagonisms within the council became sharper. Holwell refused to sign any papers relating to the council, because he considered Drake and others, by quitting the fort's defense, to have "divested themselves of all right or pretensions to the future government of the Company's affairs, or the colony." He also maintained that the remaining council members at Fort William had elected him as governor and administrator of the company's affairs, and "the gentlemen at present constituting the Agency" did not have "any just power to divest him" of that appointment.⁵⁸ He objected to the expenditure of 64,662 Arcot rupees for costs and damages for *Doddy*, because, he said, she had abandoned the defense of the company's fort for which she had been commissioned, and hence, no such expenses could be charged to the company.⁵⁹ William Tooke, in his detailed narrative of the conquest of Calcutta, described Drake's and Manningham's actions as "something so scandalous and inhuman that it is a reflection upon the nation.... [S]uch an unprecedented affair surely is not to be paralleled among the greatest barbarians, much more among Christians." He also said that in Phalta, "the junior servants' antipathy at last grew so great against some of the Council's ill conduct" that they began to question its authority, causing Drake to drop the designations governor and council, and began calling themselves "agents for the Company."⁶⁰

Another matter that rankled was the charge that the company's treasures held in the fort were stolen. This was a persistent topic in every report that circulated among French officials in India at the time about the capture of the English settlement and factories in Bengal by Siraj. When Holwell surrendered on June 20, 1756, the nawab's soldiers found only fifty thousand rupees in the fort's treasury; Siraj flew into a rage because he was expecting millions.⁶¹ Where had the treasure gone? "It is no longer a matter of doubt," said a French account, "from the way in which Mr. Drake behaved that he had formed a plan with the Commandant of the troops and certain Councillors, and that they had all agreed that these troubles offered an excellent opportunity to appropriate a portion of the wealth confided in their care."⁶² Holwell, in his first letter after

his release in Murshidabad, mentions that on the evening of June 18, when it was decided that the European women in the fort should be shifted to the boats on the river, it was also resolved to remove the company's treasure and books.⁶³ He was more specific in his next letter, from Hugli:

Whether the treasure or books were embarked I cannot say, the late President and Gentlemen below who have assumed the title and authority of "Agents for the Company's Affairs" are the best judges. After the President's departure, I made inquiry after the Sub-Treasurer and keys of the Treasury, but neither one or the other was to be found. I intended on the first recess to have opened the Treasury to have been satisfied in this particular; but that recess never came.⁶⁴

Holwell's language is careful, but the aspersion is unmistakable. Tooke was quite explicit in his allegations:

What was the reason we could not have acted as politically as they [the French and Dutch], I cannot conjecture. There is certainly some reason to think we acted upon some other scheme.... Indeed could we have resisted the Nabob's forces till succours arrived to us from the Coromandel coast and Bombay, there must have been glorious plunder for some of our Gentlemen in Council, for those in particular of the natives who had received protection of our flag would have been made to pay for it, as also no small contributions raised round about the country; besides the plunder of the river would have been very sufficient to have made a few persons' fortunes...; nay so sure were some of them of success against the Nabob... that vessels were fitted out to make prizes of the enemy's ships homeward bound, two of which were taken...; and though the Company had then in the river several small vessels that might have been sent on that expedition they were all put aside, and a vessel sent (which Mr. Drake purchased a very considerable part of) upon the expedition, that the whole plunder might be their own.⁶⁵

This is the backdrop for the first accounts of the Black Hole incident. Brijen Gupta has carefully compiled a full list. There are thirteen such sources that have come down to us, ranging from a mention in a letter written on July 3, 1756, some two weeks after Calcutta's fall, by an anonymous Frenchman of Chandannagar, to Holwell's *Genuine Narrative* written in February 1757. There is one more account—the fourteenth—by John Cooke, who was in the fort at the time of its fall, but who narrated his version of the Black Hole story before a select committee of the House of Commons in 1772, sixteen years after the incident. Gupta shows with impeccable reasoning that Holwell was directly involved in the production of every single one of these narratives—that is, they are not independent pieces of evidence but rather all the result of consultations with Holwell or a reading of his various descriptions of the event.⁶⁶ It is to

Holwell's narrative, then, that we must turn, as indeed everyone else has in the last 250 years, for an account of what happened on the night of June 20, 1756, at Fort William.

THE "GENUINE" NARRATIVE

Though born in Dublin, Holwell came from a London merchant family with education. He was trained as a doctor and traveled to India as a surgeon's mate. In Calcutta, he showed his skills in judicial and revenue administration, and became the mayor and zemindar of the settlement as well as the youngest council member. After his final return to Britain in 1760, he emerged as something of a specialist in Indian affairs, wrote historical and ethnographic tracts, and became a fellow of the Royal Society. He was keen to display his superior moral and intellectual qualities in comparison with the usual run of greedy adventurers who came out to India in the company's service.

He wrote the *Genuine Narrative* on board the *Syren* in February 1757 on his journey back to Britain from Bengal. By then, Calcutta had been recaptured by Clive's army. Holwell was now feeling much better. The sea air had, as he explained in the opening page of the narrative, "had that salutary effect on my constitution I expected; and my mind enjoys a calm it has been many months a stranger to." He had had "leisure to reflect," and since no one who had survived the night when Fort William fell had written down a detailed narrative, he felt it necessary to do so. "The annals of the world," he believed, "cannot produce an incident like it in any degree or proportion to all the dismal circumstances attending it." His account might, he said, offer hope and confidence "to such as may hereafter fall under like trials, by giving them an instance (and sure a stronger cannot well be given), that we ought never to despair, when innocence and duty have been the causes of our distress."⁶⁷

Holwell's account was composed in the form of a letter to his friend William Davis, and first published in London in 1758 under the title *A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, Who Were Suffocated in the Black-Hole in Fort William, in Calcutta, in the Kingdom of Bengal, in the Night Succeeding the 20th Day of June, 1756*.⁶⁸ By the time the narrative was published, Siraj had been defeated in Palashi and killed. Clive and the East India Company were in full charge of political affairs in Bengal.

Figure to yourself, my friend, if possible, the situation of a hundred and forty six wretches, exhausted by continual fatigue and action, thus crammed together in a cube of about eighteen feet, in a close sultry night, in Bengal, shut up to the eastward and southward (the only quarters from whence air could reach us) by dead walls, and by a wall and door to the north, open only to the westward by two win-

dows, strongly barred with iron, from which we could receive scarce any the least circulation of fresh air.⁶⁹

Holwell and the other European defenders of the fort had been ordered into the Black Hole prison at about 8:00 p.m. by the nawab's guards and forced through the only door. Somewhat improbably, considering the smallness of the room in relation to the numbers that had to be packed inside, "like one agitated wave impelling another, we were obliged to give way and enter; the rest followed like a torrent, few amongst us, the soldiers excepted, having the least idea of the dimensions or nature of a place we had never seen."⁷⁰ So begins a tale of innocence.

It was not Siraj, Holwell is careful to point out, who had ordered them to be locked up in that particular room. In fact, the nawab had "repeated his assurances to me, *on the word of a soldier*, that no harm should come to us; and indeed I believe his orders were only general, that we should for that night be secured; and that what followed was the result of revenge and resentment in the breasts of the lower Jemmasdaars, to whose custody we were delivered, for the number of their order killed during the siege." Before he went in, Holwell had been approached by Leech, the company's smith, who had earlier left the fort and returned through a secret passage, offering to escort Holwell to a boat in which he could escape. "I thanked him in the best terms I was able; but told him it was a step I could not prevail on myself to take, as I should thereby very ill repay the attachment the gentlemen and the garrison had shewn to me; and, that I was resolved to share their fate, be it what it would."⁷¹ Clearly, Holwell was eager to emphasize that he was not a Drake or a Manningham; this was, after all, also a tale of duty.

In his attitude and mental poise, Holwell was utterly different from most of his fellow prisoners as well. They were far too susceptible to "the violence of passions," whereas he knew immediately "that the only chance we had left for sustaining this misfortune, and surviving the night, was the preserving of a calm mind and quiet resignation to our fate." This is the dominant theme of his narrative: not the perfidy of Siraj or cruelty of his guards, but instead the descent of a crowd of ordinary Europeans, placed in a situation of dangerous adversity, into mindless disorder, and his own heroic struggle to retain control and discipline over his body. Soon after they had been incarcerated, Holwell began to entreat them "to curb, as much as possible, every agitation of mind and body, as raving and giving a loose to their passions could answer no purpose, but that of hastening their destruction."⁷²

Looking out of the window, Holwell noticed that an old guard "seemed to carry some compassion for us in his countenance." He spoke to him and offered to pay him a thousand rupees the next day if he would arrange to shift half of the prisoners to another room. The guard went away and came back to say that

it was impossible. Holwell offered to double the payment, on which the guard went away again and came back to announce that the nawab had gone to sleep and no one dared wake him up.⁷³

At this time, Holwell noticed that having perspired profusely, everyone was inflicted by a "raging thirst," which "increased in proportion as the body was drained of its moisture." Holwell could only be a mute witness once again to the folly of his ignorant fellow prisoners, who decided to take their clothes off: "In a few minutes I believe every man was stripped (myself, Mr. Court, and the two wounded young gentlemen by me, excepted). For a little time they flattered themselves with having gained a mighty advantage." Someone suggested that they should sit down on their haunches. "This expedient was several times put in practice, and at each time many of the poor creatures, whose natural strength was less than others, or had been more exhausted, and could not immediately recover their legs, as others did, when the word was given to rise, fell to rise no more; for they were instantly trod to death, or suffocated." When everyone was clamoring for water, the old guard took pity and ordered some skins of water. Holwell instantly knew this would have "fatal effects." "This was what I dreaded. I foresaw it would prove the ruin of the small chance left us, and assayed many times to speak to him privately to forbid its being brought; but the clamour was so loud, it became impossible."⁷⁴

Paradoxically, then, a humane gesture from a prison guard brought on the destruction of a crowd of thoughtless prisoners unable to rise above their animal instincts. "I had flattered myself that some, by preserving an equal temper of mind, might outlive the night; but now the reflection which gave me the greatest pain, was, that I saw no possibility of one escaping to tell the dismal tale." As soon as the water arrived, there was a mad rush for it. Those near the window filled up their hats to the brim, but "there ensued such violent struggles, and frequent contests to get at it, that before it reached the lips of any one, there would be scarcely a small tea-cup full left in them." The insufficient supply of water only increased the thirst. "The confusion now became general and horrid. Several quitted the other window (the only chance they had for life) to force their way to the water, and the throng and press upon the window was beyond bearing; many forcing their passage from the further part of the room, pressed down those in their way, who had less strength, and trampled them to death."⁷⁵

Holwell, however, was "still happy in the same calmness of mind I had preserved the whole time; death I expected as unavoidable, and only lamented its slow approach." In a moment of weakness, he had cried out for water. Such was the "respect and tenderness" that the other prisoners had for him that a full hat of water was brought to him. But there was no relief, and realizing at once that this was no solution, he firmly decided not to drink any more. Instead, "I kept my mouth moist from time to time by sucking the perspiration out of my shirt-

sleeves, and catching the drops as they fell, like heavy rain from my head and face: you can hardly imagine how unhappy I was if any of them escaped my mouth." Soon he discovered that the man next to him, naked like the rest of the prisoners, was also sucking his sleeve: "After I detected him, I had ever the address to begin on that sleeve first, when I thought my reservoirs were sufficiently replenished; and our mouths and noses often met in the contest." There was a hint of scientific explanation here, because Holwell seemed to be suggesting that unlike the rest of the crowd, he was aware that the salts in his sweat were more useful in his condition than water. "Before I hit upon this happy expedient, I had, in an ungovernable fit of thirst, attempted drinking my own urine; but it was so intensely bitter there was no enduring a second taste, whereas no Bristol water could be more soft or pleasant than what arose from perspiration."⁷⁶

The scene inside the prison was one of violent confusion. The prison guards seemed to find this amusing. Holwell was incensed. "Can it gain belief, that this scene of misery proved entertainment to the brutal wretches without? But so it was; and they took care to keep us supplied with water, that they might have the satisfaction of seeing us fight for it, as they phrased it, and held up lights to the bars, that they might lose no part of the inhuman diversion."⁷⁷ For Holwell, it was unforgivable that native eyes should have been allowed to witness the descent of a group of Europeans into a state of natural savagery. All he could do by way of retaliation was to transfer the attribute of "brutality" from his benighted compatriots to the amused Indian prison guards.

By half past eleven (it is unclear how Holwell managed to read his watch so often inside the dark prison cell), "the much greater number of those living were in an outrageous delirium, and the others quite ungovernable." They abused the guards and cursed the nawab.

They whose strength and spirits were quite exhausted, laid themselves down and expired quietly upon their fellows: others who had yet some strength and vigour left, made a last effort for the windows, and several succeeded by leaping and scrambling over the backs and heads of those in the first ranks; and got hold of the bars, from which there was no removing them. Many to the right and left sunk with the violent pressure, and were soon suffocated; for now a steam arose from the living and the dead, which affected us in all its circumstances, as if we were forcibly held with our heads over a bowl full of strong volatile spirit of hartshorn, until suffocated.⁷⁸

Holwell needed to use some force himself to stay alive, because "from half an hour past eleven till near two in the morning, I sustained the weight of a heavy man, with his knees in my back, and the pressure of his whole body on my head." There was a Dutch sergeant seated on Holwell's left shoulder, and a Topaz—that is, an Indo-Portuguese soldier—leaning on his right. "The two latter I fre-

quently dislodged, by shifting my hold on the bars, and driving my knuckles into their ribs." But by two o'clock, Holwell was so exhausted that he pulled out his penknife, determined to slit open his arteries, "when heaven interposed and restored me to fresh spirits and resolution, with an abhorrence of the act of cowardice I was just going to commit."⁷⁹ Soon, though, he passed out.

When day broke, some of the prisoners began to search for Holwell in the hope that he might intercede with the authorities to get them out of the cell. They recognized him by his shirt, buried under a pile of naked dead bodies, and realized he was still alive. In the meantime, the nawab apparently gave orders that the prisoners be released. "But oh! Sir, what words shall I adopt to tell you the whole that my soul suffered at reviewing the dreadful destruction round me? I will not attempt it; and, indeed, tears ... stop my pen."⁸⁰

Holwell was taken to Siraj. On the way, one of the guards gave him the friendly advice that he should tell the nawab where the company's treasure was hidden or else he would be blown from the mouth of a cannon. "The intimation gave me no manner of concern; for, at that juncture, I should have esteemed death the greatest favour the tyrant could have bestowed upon me." Siraj noticed Holwell's wretched condition and ordered that a large folio volume be brought in for him to sit on. After a drink of water, Holwell tried to describe to the nawab the terrible suffering that the prisoners had undergone. "But he stopt me short, with telling me, he was well informed of great treasure being buried, or secreted, in the fort, and that I was privy to it; and if I expected favour, must discover it." Holwell disclaimed all knowledge of any treasure. Frustrated, Siraj ordered him to be taken under guard to Murshidabad.

My being treated with this severity, I have sufficient reason to affirm, proceeded from the following causes. The Suba's resentment for my defending the fort, after the Governor, &c., had abandoned it; his prepossession touching the treasure; and thirdly, the instigations of Omichund in resentment for my not releasing him out of prison, as soon as I had the command of the fort: a circumstance, which in the heat and hurry of action, never once occurred to me, or I had certainly done it; because I thought his imprisonment unjust.⁸¹

Holwell's trip to Murshidabad as a prisoner was arduous. At every step, he was told that he was no longer the chief of the fort of Alinagar, the name that Siraj had given to the town of Calcutta, and that he must obey. As he and three other English prisoners were paraded down the streets of Murshidabad, the old Begam, Ali Vardi's widow and Siraj's grandmother, apparently noticed and took pity on them, probably interceding with the nawab on their behalf. The prisoners were presented before Siraj the next day. "The wretched spectacle we made must, I think, have made an impression on a breast the most brutal; and if he is capable of pity or contrition, his heart felt it then. I think it appeared in

sight of him in his countenance." The nawab ordered that the chains be removed, and that Holwell and his companions be allowed to go wherever they chose. Holwell was told that some of the courtiers had suggested to the nawab that Holwell had enough funds of his own to buy his freedom.

To this, I was afterwards informed, the Suba replied: "It may be; if he has any thing left, let him keep it: his sufferings have been great; he shall have his liberty." Whether this was the result of his own sentiments, or the consequence of his promise the night before to the old *Begum*, I cannot say; but believe, we owe our freedom partly to both.⁸²

A final point must be made before leaving Holwell's narrative. In the course of his description of the chaotic scenes inside the Black Hole prison, Holwell mentioned a certain naval officer called Peter Carey and added in parentheses, almost as an afterthought: "His wife, a fine woman tho' country-born, would not quit him, but accompanied him into the prison, and was one who survived." On the morning of June 21, after Holwell, Court, Walcott, and Burdet were ordered to be sent to Murshidabad, the rest of the prisoners were set free, "except," noted Holwell, "Mrs. Carey who was too young and handsome."⁸³ Other than this tantalizingly brief clause, not a word more is said about her. Much would be made of Faliceo Maria Carey later.

There is no doubt that Holwell had an ax to grind. The settlement's civil and military leadership had disgracefully abandoned the fort, and Holwell had been left behind to negotiate the inevitable surrender. The temptation would have been overwhelming for him to paint the adversity of his situation and the heroism of his devotion to duty in the most dramatic colors, especially in a tract intended for the company's stockholders and members of the public in Britain. It is also true that to protect himself from charges of inaccuracy and inconsistency, Holwell repeatedly invoked in his rhetoric the fundamental impossibility of representing this "founding trauma."⁸⁴

A careful reader of the narrative, though, cannot but conclude that the predominant theme is not the brutality of the Bengal nawab or his soldiers; it is the value of mental self-discipline and informed moral judgment in coping with unanticipated disaster.⁸⁵ In the narrative, the charge of brutality against Siraj is nothing more than a prejudice, assumed as part of the background. The nawab appears impatient and willful perhaps, yet not in any way cruel, and indeed not devoid of compassion. Some of his guards are positively helpful toward the prisoners. Holwell's tract is actually pedagogical, not accusatory. He was writing to establish what may be called elevated principles of moral discipline as self-governance for his own people. What the Indians had seen of Europeans that night in Fort William had destroyed every claim of the civilizational superiority of white Christian nations. The task was, Holwell seemed to be claiming,

the moral education of the British people to make them worthy of ruling over Moors and Gentoos steeped in tyranny and depravity. We might say with hindsight that he was calling for the imperial nation to civilize itself before taking on the task of civilizing others. In making this plea, he was somewhat ahead of his times.

RECONQUEST AND MORE

It requires a little effort to orient ourselves to the space-time coordinates of the world of the eighteenth century. If we do it, however, we should not be surprised to discover that with the council in Madras taking several months to decide on the correct version of events, the news of Calcutta's fall did not reach the East India Company directors in London until June 4, 1757, almost a year after the event. Six weeks later, on July 22, 1757, they heard from Holwell, who had just reached London after a remarkably quick voyage of five months, that Calcutta had been retaken. In London, Holwell got involved in the labyrinthine intrigues of the company. He returned to India in 1758 and became the temporary governor of Fort William when Clive left for England in 1760.

It was at this time that Holwell put up his obelisk outside the fort walls to commemorate the Black Hole deaths. There is a painting, done in 1760 and attributed to Johan Zoffany, of Holwell standing in front of the monument under construction, with a plan in his hand, instructing—or perhaps admonishing—a cowering Indian mason. In his *Genuine Narrative*, written when Siraj was still master of Bengal, he had taken care to emphasize that the nawab was not in any way personally responsible for the confinement and treatment of the Black Hole prisoners. On his memorial, however, now that Siraj was vanquished and dead, Holwell inscribed on stone his judgment that a “horrid act of violence” committed by Siraj had been “amply and deservedly revenged” by Watson and Clive. In any case, within months Holwell found himself on the wrong side in the factional wars, and as his letter of dismissal from service was making its way across the seas from London to Calcutta, he himself put in his papers and left for home.⁸⁶

The history of Bengal and indeed India had, by then, taken what would prove to be a decisive turn. This involved not a small amount of scandal, as Nicholas Dirks reminds us.⁸⁷ The debates over the loss of Calcutta concluded at Fort St. George with the finding that there was little sense in approaching the Bengal nawab for a compromise. Even if he allowed the English to return to Calcutta, he would probably insist on terms that would rid them of all their privileges and reduce them to a position similar to those of the Armenian traders. And even then, there was no guarantee that the nawab would not flex his muscles again. The decision thus was made in September 1756 to send a royal squadron

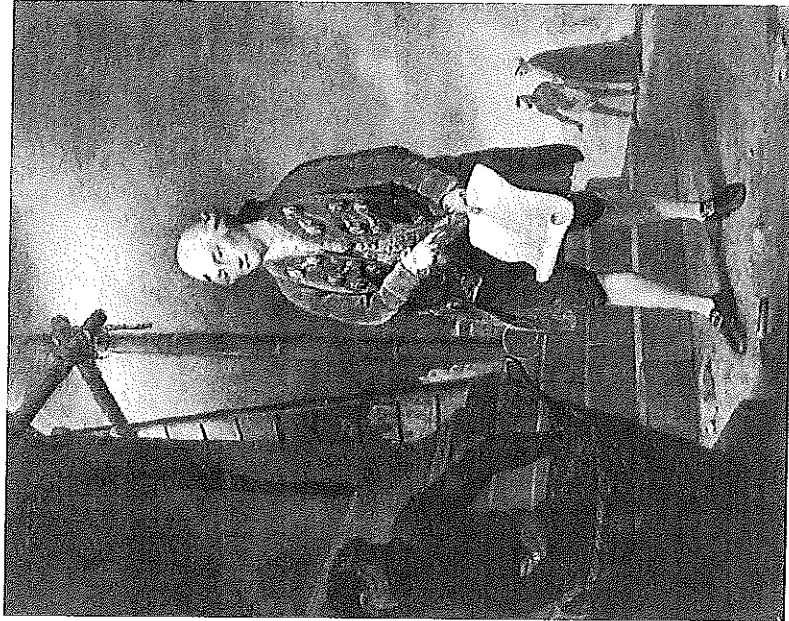


Figure 6. John Zephania Holwell, Governor of Fort William, platinotype print from painting, probably by Johan Zoffany, 1760. © The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. Source: British Library Images (P 587)

commanded by Admiral Watson, with company's troops led by Colonel Clive—forces that were available in Madras to move against the French in the event of war breaking out in Europe—to retake the company's settlement in Calcutta by force. Clive was instructed to undertake such military operations as would compel the nawab to consent to a treaty “for the best advantage of the Company.”⁸⁸ The council in Madras wrote to their counterparts in Bengal:

The mere taking of Calcutta should, we think, by no means be the end of this undertaking; not only their settlements should be restored but all their privileges established in the full extent granted by the *Great Mogul*, and ample reparations made to them for the loss they have lately sustained.... We need not represent to you the great advantage which we think it will be to the military operations ... to effect a

junction with any powers in the provinces of Bengal that may be dissatisfied with the violence of the nawab's government, or that may have pretensions to the nawabship.⁸⁹

Clive speculated: "I flatter myself that this expedition will not end with the retaking of Calcutta only, and that the Company's estate in these parts will be settled in a better and more lasting condition than ever."⁹⁰

Interestingly, officials of the French company had come to the same conclusion about the future prospects of European trade in Bengal. Siraj's capture of Calcutta had alarmed Chandernagore to no end: "His army elated with success over the English only waited for orders to fall upon us." Europeans in Bengal, it was noticed, were being treated with contempt. "The Government at Hugli now treats us with unbearable haughtiness, stops the course of our business and cheats us without any pretence in the simplest matters."⁹¹ The conclusion was clear: "If this government continues on its present footing we shall have much to suffer, and commerce will become extremely difficult."⁹² As it happened, Britain and France were heading toward a war in Europe that would, in the end, last seven years. Clive knew what he had to do in that event: "The news of a war may ... interfere with the success of this expedition. However should that happen and hostilities be committed in India, I hope we shall be able to dispossess the French at Chânnagore and leave Calcutta in a state of defence."⁹³

Siraj had left Calcutta in charge of his officer Manikchand. The nawab did not make any attempt to pursue Drake and his fleet anchored outside Phalta. It is likely that he expected the English to come to him asking for terms to return to Calcutta.⁹⁴ He probably did not anticipate that they would return with a force strong enough to retake the fort. Calcutta was reoccupied by the company's troops on January 2, 1757, without any serious resistance by the nawab's army.

But the intrigues did not cease. The company's agents in Bengal complained to officials in Madras about Clive: "We cannot conceive by what authority you have assumed a right in giving that gentleman the powers you have done, and therein treating us in the light of a subordinate.... [T]he authority and trust invested in us by our Honourable Masters have been highly infringed by your unprecedented conduct."⁹⁵ Clive in turn wrote about them: "The loss of private property, and the means of recovering it, seem to be the only object which takes up the attention of the Bengal gentlemen.... [B]elieve me they are bad subjects and rotten at heart, and will stick at nothing to prejudice you.... [T]he riches of Peru and Mexico should not induce me to dwell among them." He also complained about "the mortifications" that he had received "from Admiral Watson and the gentlemen of the squadron, in point of prerogative." Watson had apparently insisted on naming himself the fort's governor, even though Fort St. George had given Clive the responsibility, and it had taken much persuasion to force the admiral to step down.⁹⁶

True to his word, Clive did not stop with the reconquest of Calcutta. Armed with his superiors' permission "to attack Hugly or any other Moors' town, or to make reprisals in the river upon Moors' vessels ... and to dispose of the prizes that may be so taken," he immediately proceeded to attack and plunder the nawab's fort at Hugli.⁹⁷ The pillage of Hugli by the British forces was massive, and when Khwaja Wajid, the local Armenian merchant, complained about the huge losses that he had suffered, Clive explained: "I do assure you what was done there was not meant against you, but against the city of Hugley in recompence the destruction of that place was attended, and it was resolved before we left Chinapatam [Madras] that that city should fall a sacrifice."⁹⁸

During the next few days, even as there were overtures and exchanges of pleasantries between Clive and Siraj, the latter moved his troops to the neighborhood of Calcutta. Hidden behind the mist of a February morning, Clive launched a highly risky surprise attack on the nawab's troops and apparently managed to unnerve him enough to induce Siraj to agree to a treaty, referred to by historians as the treaty of Alinagar, by which he restored all the earlier privileges that the English had enjoyed.⁹⁹ He even allowed them to fortify Calcutta and establish a mint there. Siraj did not agree to provide restitution for the British losses in Calcutta, Kasimbazar, and Dhaka, but returned all seized cash and treasure. It is said that Siraj was keen to make peace with the British because of the threat of the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali advancing eastward from Delhi, which he had just occupied.¹⁰⁰ In any case, Siraj returned with his troops to Murshidabad.

There is a debate among historians as to who initiated and directed the conspiracy that finally toppled Siraj from the *masnad* at Murshidabad. No one doubts that there was a conspiracy, though. One set of arguments relies on the personal unpopularity of Siraj among many of the powerful figures within the military as well as the landed and financial elite of Bengal. Siraj was said to be arrogant, strong willed, and even vicious in his dealings with those who expected courtesy and respect from a young nawab. Many stories circulated about his cruelty, not only among Europeans, but even in the writings of contemporary Indian chroniclers familiar with the Murshidabad court. There were many powerful people in Bengal, it is said, who would have been happy to see Siraj deposed.

Another set of arguments stresses the importance of the European trade, and its deep connections with the merchant and financial groups in Bengal. The British had powerful allies in the court of Murshidabad who were their collaborators in business, especially the cousins Mahtab Rai and Swarup Chand of the house of Jagat Seth, among the wealthiest bankers in the world at the time, or merchant politicians like Amirchand, Khwaja Wajid, or Khwaja Petrus Arathoon.¹⁰¹ They were eager participants in the conspiracy to get rid of

the thoughtless Siraj, who had struck at the foundations of European trade in Bengal.

Finally, there are those who believe that in spite of all these forces opposed to Siraj, the die would not have been cast without the direct incitement provided by Clive, Watts, Sraffon, and other officials of the East India Company who had made up their minds that the only way they could secure the future of British trading interests in Bengal against the depredations of local rulers as well as French competition was to put a pliable nawab on the throne in Murshidabad. Sraffon so much as said this in a letter to one of Clive's close associates on the eve of the conspiracy: "For God's sake let us proceed on some fixed plan.... Give Mr. Watts a hint of this, the least encouragement, and he will set about forming a party.... How glorious it would be for the Company to have a Nabob devoted to them!"¹⁰²

In the meantime, news reached Bengal that war had broken out in Europe seven months before between the French and British. Clive was determined to attack Chandannagar, but Watson insisted on securing the nawab's permission. Siraj in turn announced he would not tolerate two foreign nations fighting their war within his territories, and to display his impartiality, gave the same privileges to the French in Chandannagar that he had given to the British in Calcutta. Clive began a siege of Chandannagar on March 14. A suitable bribe ensured that Nandakumar Ray, the faujdar of Hugli, would not involve the nawab's troops in defending the French. About a week later, the French surrendered, agreeing to leave Chandannagar and all their factories in Bengal at the disposal of the nawab and Admiral Watson. Fort d'Orleans in Chandannagar was promptly plundered and destroyed by the victorious British troops.

In the middle of April 1757, the conspiracy to oust Siraj began with Yar Lutf Khan, a relatively minor military officer, being pushed by the Jagat Seths as the pretender. Within a few days, however, Mir Jafar, an Arab fortune seeker from Najaf who was then the commander of the nawab's army, became the conspirators' choice. On May 1, British officials at Fort William formally resolved to join the plot:

The Committee then took into consideration, whether they could (consistently with the Peace made with the Nabob) concur in the measures proposed by Meer Jaffir of taking the Government from Souragud Dowla, and setting himself up.... [T]he Committee were unanimously of opinion that there could be no dependence on this Nabob's word, honour, and friendship, and that a revolution in the Government would be extremely for the advantage of the Company's affairs.¹⁰³

A secret treaty was concluded by Watts, the company resident in the Murshidabad court, with Mir Jafar that set out the terms of his alliance with the British after he became the nawab. This included a military alliance, turning over all French possessions to the British, huge reparations for the losses suffered dur-

ing Siraj's occupation of Calcutta, and a promise by the future nawab not to build fortifications to the south of Hugli.¹⁰⁴ In addition to the Jagat Seth cousins, Rai Durlabham Som, the nawab's revenue minister, joined the plot.¹⁰⁵ Amirchand, a key figure through whom the British dealt with members of the nawab's court, was so distrusted by Clive that his name was omitted from the list of beneficiaries in the original copy of the secret treaty with Mir Jafar and only included in a duplicate shown to Amirchand. Appalled by this trickery, Watson refused to sign the false copy, at which point Clive, not one to be impeded by a squeamish conscience, had the admiral's signature forged.¹⁰⁶

All that remained was a pretext to break the peace with Siraj. On June 13, Clive sent the nawab an ultimatum accusing him of not having observed the treaty of Alinagar and began to move with his forces toward Murshidabad. Siraj marched to meet Clive at Palashi (Plassey), about 150 kilometers north of Calcutta and 50 kilometers south of Murshidabad. The nawab's forces probably numbered around fifteen thousand, while Clive commanded a thousand European and two thousand Indian troops. But the conspiracy ensured that three of the nawab's generals—Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh, and Yar Lutf—would reduce about two-thirds of his army to the role of silent spectators. The battle lasted from the morning until noon with neither side gaining a clear advantage. At this point, a sudden thunderstorm turned the battlefield into a swamp. Large stocks of gunpowder in the nawab's camp were rendered useless by the rain. The heavy artillery could hardly be moved through the sludge. At around three in the afternoon, Mir Madan, one of the more effective commanders in the nawab's army, was killed. Alarmed, Siraj pleaded with Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh to save his honor. Both advised him to suspend hostilities until the next morning. Siraj commanded Mohanlal and the other officers to leave their positions. The British troops then began an assault that soon led to a complete rout of the nawab's army. Realizing that all was lost, Siraj himself left the field. The battle was over by the fall of dusk.¹⁰⁷

The next day, Clive wrote to Mir Jafar: "I congratulate you on the victory, which is yours not mine.... We propose marching to-morrow to compleat the conquest that God has blessed us with, and I hope to have the honour of proclaiming you Nabob."¹⁰⁸ Siraj, meanwhile, had returned to Murshidabad in the darkness of night and left in disguise the next day. Mir Jafar was proclaimed the nawab of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa on June 29. The following day, Siraj was discovered, brought back to the capital, and brutally murdered under the direction of Mir Jafar's son Miran on July 2, 1757.

WHOSE REVOLUTION?

The Khoshbagh cemetery is across the Bhagirathi River from the town of Murshidabad. A pall of violent death hangs over this austere garden. One enclosure

has nineteen graves belonging, it is said, to Siraj's kin, all poisoned to death one night after a feast arranged by Miran. There is the grave, allegedly, of Dan Shah Fakir, a mendicant who recognized the fugitive nawab at the riverside near Rajmahal and handed him over to Mir Jafar's spies. The young man who works as a guide at Khoshbagh feels it necessary to explain that Mir Jafar believed that a fakir who could betray the country's ruler for the love of money could easily be bought over once more to betray the next ruler, so he had him and his family put to death. None of the guide's stories, however, are supported by the official gazetteer, which mentions that most of these unmarked graves belong to unknown members of Nawab Ali Vardi's lineage.¹⁰⁹

The modest mausoleum at the center of Khoshbagh shelters the grave of Ali Vardi, who had ominously predicted the advent of the hatmen as rulers of the shores of India, but even he could not have known that it would happen so soon after his death. Next to him is buried Siraj, "the last independent ruler of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa," as the guide says in a voice heavy with emotion. The adjacent graves belong to Lutf-un-nesa, Siraj's wife, and a younger brother, all killed, the guide notes, immediately after the young nawab's death. The history books do not corroborate the details of the guide's narrative. But he is entitled to his dramatic license. Palashi may have been a nonbattle, but the revolutions that followed in Bengal were immeasurably bloody.¹¹⁰

Historians have often speculated on the political thinking behind Siraj's actions against the British. It is doubtful that anyone will ever come up with a satisfactory answer, given the fact that Siraj died in his early twenties and held power for just over a year. Yet the popular judgment in Bengal on his successor Mir Jafar is unambiguous. His palace at Jafaraganj in the town of Murshidabad has vanished. All that survives is a massive gate, impressive even in ruin, known in town as *nimakharam dauri*, the traitor's gate.

CHAPTER TWO

A Secret Veil

IT HAS OFTEN been said in the last two centuries that the British acquired the territories of Bengal without ever having planned to do so. The description was turned into a much-repeated aphorism by the historian John Seeley, who remarked in 1883: "Nothing great that has ever been done by Englishmen was done so unintentionally, so accidentally, as the conquest of India."¹ Of course, it is necessary to remind ourselves that when considering large processes such as the rise of modern empires, it is foolish to expect to identify world-historical intentions in the careers of individual politicians or generals. The idea that empires are founded by single figures of rare genius is a prejudice we have carried over from older histories of bygone empires. Modern empires, like modern capitalism and modern nation-states, do not have founders, notwithstanding the persistent desire in certain quarters to claim and celebrate them. Perhaps it is only now, at this juncture at the beginning of the twenty-first century when all three entities—capitalism, the nation-state, and empire—can be subjected to systematic historical critique, that we can see this clearly. It is easier today to argue that we should not expect to read intentions of empire directly out of Clive's letters, the council's proceedings at Fort St. George, or the resolutions of the East India Company directors in London. They must be sought in the complex formations of discourse that shaped, through rules and precedents, precepts and advices, traditions and innovations, the conditions of practice for the strategic move toward conquest and territorial empire.

THE CONQUEST IN HISTORY

What do we know about the discursive formation within which the East India Company made sense of the geographic entity called India in the mid-eighteenth century? What were the strategic possibilities open to its agents in London and India? Fortunately, a mountain of written records on this subject has been available to historians for the last two centuries or more. It is thus possible to sketch out the following outline of the parameters within which Clive had to think and act.

First, there was a clear genealogy of claims of privilege—based on racial and religious difference, going all the way back to the Portuguese—available to