

INTERVIEW

Into the nuances of history: The Battle of Plassey

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

Sudeep Chakravarti is an eminent commentator and author whose narrative non-fiction and fiction have been translated into Bangla, Hindi, Spanish, Portuguese, German and more. In January 2020, his book—*Plassey: The Battle That Changed the Course of Indian History* (Aleph Book Company, India)—sought to parse through the history and the myths surrounding the topic. This week we brought together the author and our Commercial Supplements Editor Shamsuddoza Sajen to discuss the book and the battle, fought 263 years ago on June 23.

Why did the British want to capture the throne of Bengal? Was the Battle of Plassey inevitable?

Bengal was a major Asian trade hub. Here cottons and silks were legendary, there was jute, lac, saltpetre for making gunpowder and preserving foods. Finance was relatively easy. The rivers and waterways ensured excellent transportation and communication networks. And Bengal was rich: its revenues helped to sustain Mughal coffers and armies, and later, European trade in India. Siraj and the French were both perceived as great political and commercial threats by the British. They wanted both removed from the chessboard.

A make-or-break conflict with Siraj-ud-daulah became a priority for John Company in early 1757. The Seven Years' War had broken out in Europe. That hostility between Britain and France carried over to Bengal, and weakened the so-called 'Neutrality of the Ganges', a tenuous understanding by which Europeans attempted to insulate the Bengal trade. When Siraj's outreach to the French began to increase from February, the die was cast. First the French settlement of Chandannagar north of Calcutta was destroyed by the British, in March. The elites of Murshidabad now formally conspired with John Company against the nawab and the stage was set for what came to be called the Battle of Plassey, fought on June 23, 1757. But the outcomes were far from certain. It's all in my book.

How did the battle change the course of Indian and global history?

As an outcome of the battle the British put their imprimatur on the court of Bengal alongside defeating the French. And Plassey set off another chain of events: the granting of *diwani* rights of Bengal and Bihar to the Company in 1765. The Company's move west to Awadh, and then, in a few short decades, to Delhi. The Mutiny in 1857. The formal replacing of Company with Crown. Bengal—and India—becoming the hub and glory of the British Empire, underwriting its local and global growth. It all began with the Company's victory—British victory—at Plassey.

What sources did you tap into for your research? What does your book add to the existing literature around the Battle of Plassey? Plassey, like all my books, required intensive and extensive research—and also much travel. This required a mix of library research, books,



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monographs, articles and reportage—flavours gathered while visiting Kolkata, Murshidabad, towns and villages up and down the Hugli-Bhagirathi river, places in Bangladesh and Jharkhand. And, of course, Plassey.

Equally, it was for me important to go beyond English and Persian to include sources from France, the Netherlands, and Bangladesh—once part of greater Bengal—and even look at cultural sources like poetry, folk theatre and movies to see how Plassey is portrayed, and why. I also realised that several Company and British sources, even Persian sources, had only been partially plumbed. This offered an opportunity to extract crucial information that has largely been overlooked.

My book seeks to offer a balanced view. This approach is, to my mind, the appropriate way of treating an event so pivotal to India, Bangladesh and the subcontinent. There is a crucial need to peel away layers to expose the truths, the lies, and the nuances. The descriptions of Hapless Siraj, Crafty Clive and Treacherous Mir Jafar cannot be the only absolutes, because they are not.

Nawab Siraj-ud-daula as a historical character is fraught with nationalist, imperialist and communal prejudices. How does your book engage with this idea?

Siraj-ud-daula is neither absolute villain nor tragic hero—and this opinion is gleaned from my research, not my emotion. He was a victim of circumstances of his own making as well as some beyond his control. Siraj was callow, somewhat impulsive, certainly spoilt, naturally nervous and tense, but hardly the martyred nawab or the

illiterate and complete Caligula he is made out to be.

Why should we discuss the events of Plassey now, when the erstwhile Subah of Bengal is fractured into two separate entities?

To know our past for what it really was is as crucial as understanding our present for what it really is. Those who see history as a fantasy-factory, and the fundamentalists and ultra-right politicians who see history as an opportunity for pamphleteering, evoking hatred and seeking genocidal revenge, are the truest enemies of history. Certainly, the events of Plassey are rooted in schism. But they cannot continue to be a reason for schism.

An extended version of this article is available online.

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BOOK REVIEW

An intellectual at his finest

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQU L ISLAM

Aaj O Agamikaal: Nirbachito Shakkhatkar (Daily Star Books, 2020) by Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury and edited by Emran Mahfuz, a young poet and writer, comprises a selection of interviews given by Professor Chowdhury in his long career as an academic, writer and a strong voice of social justice and democracy. With 21 interviews, *Aaj O Agamikaal* is rich with insight on democracy, education, freedom of speech, the Liberation War, and literature and culture. The book starts with an interview with Keshab Mukhopadhyay and ends with reflections on the quota movement.

Since the merciless killing of Bangabandhu, different governments have ripped off the constitution, subsequently letting opportunism and bigotry seep into politics and people's mindsets. Since then disparities have grown in society, in the education system, and hostile relationships exist among political parties; as a result, discrimination abounds in every sector. Choudhury believes that Bengalis have a long legacy of living together peacefully, but the issue of religious and communal conflicts—the latter of which spawned upon the arrival of the British—has gone

Choudhury points out, "Everyone has to leave this world, but creative people never die. To keep the dead alive, the living should live on" (translation mine). There is deep philosophy in this remark. He further articulates, "Humans are called the best creation, but actually they are selfish beings." For even an insignificant gain, a person does not refrain from killing another, and in a capitalist society, the number of the selfish only multiplies. There is no denying our two opposite virtues: animalism and empathy.

What Choudhury predominantly stands against are capitalism, fundamentalism, social injustice and violation of human rights. Over and over, he emphasises that only socialism can ensure emancipation of human beings from subjugation and inequality. He stresses on the separation of religion from politics and the state. In this respect, writers, poets and artists can play a vital role to inspire people to think outside the box. Great writers pose a challenge to the existing state apparatuses, whereas minuscule ones lick statesmen's boots, hoping to earn favour. Following the flow of the current, no one can create great literature. And yet, intellectuals have started becoming mouthpieces for political parties.

The meaning of life, to Professor Chowdhury, is to live well and such a life has three elements: creativity, a sense of right and wrong, and self-respect. He places conscience above courage. At this stage of life, he is happy, but not content, because many of the dreams that the people saw during the Liberation War are yet to materialise.

The book *Aaj O Agamikaal*: certainly inspires a reader to look back and forward, as the writer covers almost everything that a conscious person may need to build his country anew. Among manifold issues, he reflects on educational institutions, Shakespeare, Bacon, Tagore, Nazrul, Jibanananda Das, European revolutions, the two world wars, gender discrimination and more. There is weight and insight in his words. Except for some typos, the book is well presented, and lucidity of prose sets the seal on a smooth read. It is no doubt a valuable document for Bengali readers.



COVER ART: MANAN MORSHED

unaddressed on an institutional level. Consequently, the country has seen a rise in fanaticism and hooliganism. If the three main sectors—executive, legislative, and judiciary—do not work properly, if people do not see hope in economic development and equal distribution of wealth, the disadvantaged will take recourse to criminal activities. The country will be doomed to turmoil. Asked about his thoughts on death,

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The book is available on Rokomari and at Bookworm Bangladesh, Friends Book Corner, New Market and Bookends, Unimart.

#DADMAN LIFE HACKS

E. RAZA RONNY



CARTOON: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

THE SHELF

GREAT DADS IN LITERATURE

DS BOOKS DESK

Social media brimmed with photos and stories of dads for Father's Day this past Sunday, June 21. But who were some of the fathers we have loved reading in books? The *DS Books* team chimed in with their favourites.

KABULIWALA (1892)

Rabindranath Tagore
Tagore's short story portrays a father who is far away from his home. He misses his daughter and his fatherly affection sparks up after encountering a young girl who resembles his child. The story portrays not only the tenderness a father feels towards his daughter, but also how that love can shape the dynamics between two fathers, each from different circumstances in life.

THE LOWLAND (2013)

Jhumpa Lahiri
Subhash in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel—the brother who leaves to study in Rhode Island—goes on to become an especially tender father to his daughter. The generational struggle between them is beautifully portrayed; their inability to

communicate their shared trauma feels painfully real.

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA (1950-1956)

C S Lewis
Lewis' fantasy series has always had religious underpinnings, with critics theorizing that Aslan the lion could be a metaphor for Jesus Christ. But he is also a father figure of sorts, not just for the Pevensie children whom he guides through life, but also for the creatures of Narnia, all of whom he breathed life into. They look up to Aslan more as a paternal figure than a king, as is illustrated by Lewis through the Pevensies' coronation ceremony hosted by Aslan himself.

THE BOAT PEOPLE (2018)

Sharon Bala
The protagonist in Bala's novel sacrifices blood, sweat and tears to protect his son from the perils of a civil war in Sri Lanka. Even after they land in Canada after a long journey by

boat, he suffers fresh trials to protect his son from imprisonment and deportation as they seek asylum.

MY STRUGGLE BOOK 2: MAN IN LOVE (2009)

Karl Ove Knausgaard
Knausgaard's book is about him reconciling his roles as a father and as a writer. He feels strongly responsible for his daughter and her well-being but at the same time, he has a duty towards literature. He writes about his place in all this with almost brutal honesty, sparing no embarrassing detail.

DRAGONFLY SEA (2019)

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor
On the island of Pate in coastal Kenya, sailor Muhidin arrives first as a friend for Ayaana. As the plot progresses he becomes her mother's love interest and, therefore, a father to her. Muhidin is a rigid figure, but he shields Ayaana from radicalisation and the social stigma that is rife in a Kenyan island for a single mother and her child.

