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THE ROAD TO PLASSEY A REAPPRAISAL OF THE BRITISH CONQUEST OF BENGAL, 1757

Sushil Chaudhury

This paper argues, contrary to received wisdom, that the Plassey conspiracy leading to the British conquest of Bengal in 1757 was engineered and encouraged by the British who in their project of the revolution roped in an influential section of the Murshidabad *darbar*. It has been maintained even in the latest studies¹ that the British had no ‘calculated plotting’ behind the Plassey conspiracy, that it was the internal ‘crisis’ both political and economic, which ‘inevitably brought in’ the British, that it was the Indian conspirators who invited British to help them in deposing the young nawab Sirajuddaula. It will be shown in this paper with day to day developments from European archives, especially the very British records, how it was the British who were too anxious to bring about the revolution by overthrowing Sirajuddaula. The evidence put forward here will reconstruct how the British tried their best till the last moment before the battle of Plassey to persuade the disgruntled courtiers of the nawab to stick to the British ‘project’ of a revolution.

Thus it is not surprising that even after the finalisation of the conspiracy, the road to Plassey was neither very straight nor an easy one. Anxious as the British were to bring about the coup, it was left to them to co-ordinate and organise the plan, as the Indian conspirators could not be taken for granted. It was Watts, shrewd as he was, who realised the situation quite well and thus observed about the Indian conspirators.²

“We can expect no more assistance than that they will stand neutral, and wait the event of a battle. If we were successful they will reap the benefit, if otherwise they will continue as they were without appearing to have been concerned with us.”

However, the agreement with Mir Jafar notwithstanding, the Select Committee became extremely anxious to put its plan of revolution into execution. On 11 June it considered and debated whether it would be ‘most proper for our army’ to march directly towards Murshidabad or wait for further advice and a plan of operations from Mir Jafar. It came to the conclusion that no time should be lost and that the army should directly march for the following reasons.³

"The the present conjuncture is the most favourable that can offer to carry the project for a revolution in favour of Meer Jaffier into execution, as the secret by delaying the execution may be discovered and *our whole scheme* of course *overset* by his being cut off, in which case we shall be exposed to the Nabob's resentment and *left to act singly against the united force of the country*".

In fact, Watts was urging Clive and Select Committee to march soon after the conclusion of the agreement with Mir Jafar.⁴ Before he fled from Murshidabad on 12 June, he again advised Clive to march immediately as 'the least delay would ruin our affair.'⁵ Meanwhile a serious complication cropped up. Mir Jafar was dismissed from the office of *bakshi* by the nawab around 9 June⁶ which led to such a crisis in the relations between the nawab and Mir Jafar that, according to Scrafton, was likely to 'have blasted all our hopes'. Mir Jafar thought himself to be in such danger that he did not venture to go to the court, being afraid of an attempt on his life. He informed Clive of the situation he was in, adding that nothing but Clive's march could extricate him from the danger.⁷ The nawab vacillated and failed to take a firm stand against Mir Jafar. His faithful friends tried to convince him that it was at Mir Jafar's instance that the British intended to march towards Murshidabad and advised him to fall on Mir Jafar immediately. But others in the court who were in league with Mir Jafar persuaded Sirajuddaula to make up the breach for the present and defer his designs to some more favourable occasion. And thus followed a reconciliation between Siraj and Mir Jafar. Both swore on the Koran- the nawab that he would never attempt on the latter's life and Mir Jafar that he would be the nawab's faithful soldier and fight for him to the last drop of his blood. Then they 'parted with smiles on their countenances, and treachery in their hearts, and happy in the thought of over-reaching the other'. As Scrafton rightly observed: 'If the Soubah erred before in abandoning the French, he doubly erred now, in admitting a suspicious friend....to continue in the charge of a great body of troops, when self-defence would have taught him to make use of for his own preservation'.⁸ Jean Law also reflected that any man but Sirajuddaula would have found means of arresting and imprisoning Mir Jafar, Roy Durlabh Ram and the Seths. He opined that if this blow was struck, it was probable the British would not have dared advance towards Murshidabad.⁹

The patching up between Sirajuddaula and Mir Jafar made the latter a suspect in the eyes of the British. Watts wrote that though Mir Jafar was again joined with the nawab but without any real reconciliation on either part, this was sufficient to raise a doubt, how

far 'any dependence could be formed upon his acting, and what followed, plainly showed that was not ill-founded'.¹⁰ But by now the British were all set to wage war on Sirajuddaula. Before he began his march towards Murshidabad, Clive wrote to Shaikh Amirullah, the *faujdar* of Hughli, on 11 June that he was marching to the capital in order to see that the articles of the treaty were complied with.¹¹ Amirullah wrote back to Clive the next day:¹²

'While I was near the Nabob I saw nothing what bespoke the most friendly intention towards the English, and earnest desire to finish the treaty with the English, and it is only the great importance of the affairs that has occasioned the delay. It is not proper that on the misrepresentation of bad men you should take such an immediate resolution to march to Muxadabad'.

But the British had to find an excuse to execute their project of a revolution. So Clive wrote to the nawab on 13 June that he was marching towards Murshidabad as the latter had not been true to the treaty, that in corresponding with Bussy he violated what he agreed earlier that 'your enemies should be mine and mine yours'¹³ and that he intended to put the dispute to arbitration before the 'great men' at Murshidabad.¹⁴ But the nawab on his side maintained consistently from the end of April that he remained unalterably firm to the treaty and that 'there is nor shall be any deviation from it' on his side. He also warned the British, time and again, that if they began their march that would be tantamount to the breaking of the treaty by them.¹⁵ After Watts' flight from Murshidabad he wrote to Clive and Watson that this was 'an evident mark of deceit and of an intention to break the treaty'. When Clive began his march he had received nothing but bare promises from Mir Jafar with whom he had even no personal acquaintance. He reached Katwa on 19 June when it fell to the British. He halted there for two days 'in the most uneasy suspense' in order to receive some intelligence and gain certain advice of what might be expected from those 'who were entered into the pary with, and engaged to support' Mir Jafar. But when this arrived, it was, as Watts observed, far from being satisfactory or explicit.¹⁶

As a result Clive was quite nervous. He wrote to the Select Committee on 19 June that he felt 'the greatest anxiety at the little intelligence' he received from Mir Jafar, and that 'if he (Mir Jafar) was not treacherous, his cautiousness from want of strength of the British' would, he feared, upset the expedition. At the same time he informed the Committee that he was trying 'a last effort' to prevail upon Mir Jafar to march out and join the British. He made it clear to the Committee that he would not cross the river unless Mir Jafar joined

him, and that if he could only secure 8 or 10,000 *maunds* of grain he could, with this and what he had secured at Katwa, hold his position until after the rains, when, if necessary, it would be easy to form an alliance with the Marathas or the Raja of Birbhum or even Ghaziuddin Khan, the *wazir* of Delhi. It is of great significance that he informed the Committee that he would act with such caution as not to risk the loss of the British forces because 'whilst we have them, we may always have it in our power to bring about a revolution, should the present not succeed'.¹⁷ In other words, the British were intent on deposing Sirajuddaula, even if Mir Jafar and his fellow conspirators failed to help the British, and according to the British plan, this could have been brought about even with the help of others, not necessarily with the assistance of a section of the leading personalities of the Murshidabad *darbar*. Even at this point, Clive was not sure about Mir Jafar and that was why he asked the Select Committee to instruct him how he should act in case Mir Jafar 'can give us no assistance'.¹⁸

However, committed as he was to bring about the revolution, Clive did not lose hope and tried his best to persuade Mir Jafar to join him. He wrote to Mir Jafar from Katwa on 19 June:¹⁹

'It gives me great concern that in an affair of so great consequence to yourself in particular that you *do not exert yourself more*. So long as I have been on my march you have not yet given me that least information what measures it is necessary for me to take....I shall wait here till I have proper encouragement to proceed. I think it *absolutely necessary that you should join my army* as soon as possible'.

The above only shows how anxious the British were to bring about the coup while Mir Jafar and his allies were only half-hearted in their approach. Even as late as 21 June, Clive wrote to the Select Committee that he was at a loss how to act at the prevailing situation, especially if he had received a confirmation of Mir Jafar's resolution to 'stand neuter'. He was apprehensive that if the British attacked nawab's forces, it would be entrenched and the British would be without any assistance. He reiterated the expediency of sending an embassy to Ghaziuddin Khan or the Marathas to invite them in.²⁰

Be that as it may, Clive's letter to the Select Committee was discussed on 23 June and the members present, Drake and Becher, were of opinion that the Colonel's apprehensions were not well grounded. The Committee resolved that no thoughts could be entertained of a fresh treaty with the nawab, that 'if our strength is esteemed sufficient and a favourable opportunity presents itself, it would be best 'to put the issue of our affairs on a decisive engagement

as the only alternative'. It thought that delay would be fatal for the British as 'we shall daily diminish in our numbers' while the nawab would be able to increase his army by calling in forces from all quarters. So it instructed Clive to force an engagement 'provided he thinks there is a good prospect of success' of which it had no doubt if it was attempted without delay.²¹

This diplomatically worded instruction of Select Committee did not reach Clive until 27 June, when his victory being complete, he replied with dignified contempt that its contents were 'so indefinite and contradictory that I can put no other construction on it, than an intent to clear yourselves at my expense, had the expedition miscarried'.²² Meanwhile he called a Council of War with much misgiving on 21 June. As he explained in a letter to the Select Committee, the purpose was whether or not it was proper without the assistance of some country power to attack the nawab and that he was waiting for some encouragement from Mir Jafar to proceed.²³ The proceedings of the Council were thus reported by Eyre Coote:²⁴

'The Colonel informed the Council that he found he could not depend on Meer Jaffier for anything more than his standing neuter in case we came to an action with the Nabob, that Monsieur Law with a body of French was then within days' march of joining the Nabob....and that he called us together, to desire our opinions, whether in those circumstances it would be prudent to come to immediate action with the Nabob or fortify ourselves where we were and remain till the monsoon was over, and the Morattoes could be brought into the country to join us'.

It should be noted here again that even a few days before Plassey, Clive was thinking of an alliance with the Marathas to overthrow Sirajuddaula clearly indicating that the coup was essentially a British project which they were anxious to carry out with the help of any indigenous power and not necessarily with the assistance of disgruntled elements in Murshidabad.

In the Council of War, Clive voted against immediate action while of the remaining members twelve voted against and seven for it. But an hour after the Council meeting, he informed Eyre Coote that he would march the next day,²⁵ though he had not yet received either any intelligence or plan of operation from Mir Jafar- a fact which only underlines the eagerness of the British to bring about the revolution. On 22 June early in the morning the British army under Clive set out for Plassey. But on that very day, probably before he began his march, Clive again made a frantic appeal to Mir Jafar to join him wherein he wrote:²⁶

‘I am determined to risque everything on your account, though you will not exert yourself. I shall be on the other side of the river this evening. If you will join me at Placis, I will march half way to meet you... Give me [leave] to call to your mind how much your own glory and safely depends upon it. *Be assured if you do this you will be Subah of these Provinces*, but if you cannot do even this length to assist us I call God to witness the fault is not mine....’

What an enticement and a veiled threat to Mir Jafar to join the British ! In the early afternoon of 22 June, Clive received Mir Jafar’s letter and in the early evening he wrote to Mir Jafar of his resolution to proceed immediately to Plassey.²⁷

Turning to the nawab’s camp, one finds that the situation there was confused. As we have seen, both the British and the French were bribing as many people as they could afford. But Jean Law with his limited resources could only buy men whom the British did not particularly want and who, with more money power and with Umichand’s assistance, succeeded in penetrating the Murshidabad *darbar* more effectively than the French. And after the fall of Chandernagore, Sirajuddaula was completely bewildered. In fact, it destroyed the chances of Franco-Bengali alliance against the British and made the British comparatively free to take bolder steps against the Bengal nawab. Sirajuddaula outwardly conveyed his ‘inexpressible pleasure’ at the British victory²⁸ but all the same time did not desist from giving encouragement to Law at Kasimbazar, or from sending letters to Bussy who was reported to have moved from the Deccan to Cuttack. He sent a *jamadar* to Law with a hundred musketeers to guard the French factory at Kasimbazar and one of his flags to pur over the gates as Law had asked him to do. He also sent Law ‘word to fear nothing, that he would support me with all his forces’²⁹. He is supposed to have written letters to Bussy wherein he said:³⁰

‘What can I write of the perfidy of the English, they have without ground picked a quarrel with Monsieur Renault and by force his factory. They now want to quarrel with Monsieur Law your Chief at Cassimbazar but I will take care to oppose and overthrow their proceedings. When you come to Ballasore I will then send Monsieur Law to your assistance to convince you of my sincerity. I now send *perwanahs* to [my officers].... to lend you all possible assistance’.

Though the authenticity of these letters is recently questioned, Law himself refers to some correspondence of Sirajuddaula and himself with Bussy.³¹ The fact of matter appears to be that the nawab, intimidated by the British and enfeebled by the simmering discontent in his court where he vaguely suspected a conspiracy brewing up, was only half-hearted in his negotiations with the French for an effective

alliance against the British.

Meanwhile, the British had changed their stance, emboldened by the fall of Chandernagore and the nawab's isolation. Clive now sent new instructions to Watts on the course he was to adopt with the nawab which are worth quoting at length:³²

'The bent of our politics hitherto has been by haughty and by submissive letters such as the occasion required to persuade him [the nawab] to abandon the French to us. We must in pursuit of that system now endeavour to convince [him] that what we have done is best both for him and us; the argument that will best serve that purpose must be drawn from their actions on the coast of Coromandel, compared with ours on the same.... Represent to him in the strongest light what a state that have reduced Salabut Jang [the *nizam*] to, that they have extorted whole provinces from him.... That we shall always be ready to support him against his enemies, and that desire in our return only a strictly compliance with his treaty with us and free currency for our trade; that we do not aim at any further possessions than what our *firman* has given us; that we shall henceforward act as merchants, but *shall always keep a force sufficient to support him against all his enemies*. Tell him with such an army as I now command the French would not fail to raise disturbances in his country and never lay down their arms till they had extorted at least a province from him. But that our whole aim is to have the treaty made with him strictly complied with. That it is absolutely necessary that the good work now begun should be completed and that he *give up to us the French and their property wherever they are found*'.

It is clear from the above that the capture of Chandernagore was not enough from the British point of view. Going beyond the terms of the treaty with Sirajuddaula, they wanted to keep a 'sufficient' force on the pleas of supporting him against his enemies and also deliver all the French factories in Bengal to them. It appears that the possibility of a Franco-Bengali alliance seemed to threaten the British even after the fall of Chndarnagore and they thought as long as Law remained at Kasimbazar, French influence at Murshidabad also remained. So despite urgent appeals from Madras for his return, Clive had decided to stay on in Bengal to expel the French from the province. He wrote to Pigot, governor of Madras, on 29 March: 'Our stay till August, which is now become unavoidable, will, I hope, settle everything here in the most advantageous manner for the Company, and perhaps induce the Nabob to give up all the French Factory: This will be driving them out root and branch'.³³ On the very same day he wrote to Sirajuddaula to say that as long as France and Britain were at war in Europe, they would also be at war in Bengal. Therefore there would be no peace for Siraj unless he gave up the French properties and settlements to the

British. Then the British, as Clive stated, would be 'without rivals and our whole thoughts ready to obey your commands and assists you in all those who dare to molest the peace of your kingdom'.³⁴

Sirajuddaula was possibly well aware that his own cause would have been better served if the rivalry between the French and the British continued. But he was now not in a position to control events. However he did try to put in a number of excuses to Clive's proposition. He pointed out that the French had settled in the province with the permission of the Mughal emperor and that if he expelled them it would reduce the imperial revenues. He, however, suggested to Clive to secure a letter of surrender of the French factories from Renault and also stipulated that the British should indemnify the emperor for the loss of custom duties from the French.³⁵ But Clive tried to pressurise the nawab, accusing him of non-fulfilment of the terms of the February treaty which, as we have seen earlier, was quite untrue. As Law observes, the British worried him [nawab] ceaselessly with a thousands extravagant demands.³⁶ In fact, Clive's demands were mere excuses to harangue Sirajuddaula who, however, in order to avoid open breach with the British apparently decided to remove from Murshidabad one of the sources of hostility towards him and directed Law on 7 April to leave the capital. Law's description of what followed underline the utter helplessness, timidity and vacillation of the young nawab in the face of adverse circumstances he was faced with.³⁷ He observed that driving away of the French was 'not in any way the intention of the Nabob' and that the latter wished to keep them as a check on the British. So on 10 April he was summoned to the court and, if Law is taken into confidence, the nawab probably had intended to arrest Law and hand him over to the British. The timely arrival of a small force of French soldiers made Siraj change his mind. When Law had an audience with the nawab, he was asked to accept Watt's proposal to surrender the French factory at Kasimbazar and go to Calcutta or to leave the nawab's territories immediately. Sirajuddaula told him, as Law reports:³⁸

'Your nation is the cause of all the importunities I now suffer from the English. I do not wish to embroil the whole country for your sake. You are not strong enough to defend yourselves, you must give way. You ought to remember that when I has need of your assistance you always refused it. You ought not to expect it from me now'.

Law was frank enough to admit that 'after our behaviour to him I had not much to say in reply'. He pointed out that the nawab 'kept his eyes cast down that it was as it were against his will' that he wanted him to leave. When he told the nawab he intended to go in the direction of Patna, every one except the nawab and Khwaja Wajid 'cried out

together as if in concert' that he should go to Midnapur or Cuttack. The nawab kept his face down and listened attentively but said nothing. When Law asked him specially whether he wanted him to be placed in the hands of the British, the nawab replied: 'No, no, take what road you like and may God conduct you'.³⁹ According to the author of the *Seir*, Sirajuddaula promised Law that he would recall him in future if necessary, to which he replied: 'Send for me again? Rest assured, my Lord Nabob, that this is last time we shall see each other, Remember my Lord, we shall never meet again; it is nearly impossible'.⁴⁰ But neither Law nor Watts who was present at all Law's interviews with the nawab mentions anything like this. Finally, Law left Murshidabad on 16 April. While he was passing through Bhagalpur, he received an order from Sirajuddaula to stop and wait for a *parwana* in which his wishes were conveyed. He received it next day where the nawab asked him to return at once to Murshidabad to join him and attack the British. But he suspected 'some treachery in this' and wanted to be certain of the nawab's real intentions. He decided to send M. de St. Fray to the nawab to find out what was actually happening in Murshidabad and wrote to the nawab that he was ready to join him but he needed money to pay his troops.

Law received a second *parwana* from Sirajuddaula on 6 May, which asked him not to come to Murshidabad and remain in Rajmahal. But as he received no communication from the French sources in Murshidabad, he remained suspicious and decided to proceed, on the way to Patna, to Munger where he arrived on 7 May. It was there that he learned the details of what happened in the capital. He reflected later that the nawab, enraged at the way in which he was treated by the British, resolved not to humour the British any further and determined to recall the French. But as everything was not yet ready for 'the execution of the great plot the English and the Seths thought proper to soothe the Nawab's irritation for a time'.⁴¹ However, Law arrived in Patna on 3 June and was received 'with every appearance of friendship' by Ramnarain, the deputy governor there. He flattered himself that in the event of anything new happening, Sirajuddaula would be careful to let him know in time. The British on their part, as Law recounts, tried their best 'to deceive the Nawab more completely and lull him into a false security'. Sirajuddaula was little suspicious of the British design as yet. But Law point out that all this they 'were thinking only how to ruin the Nawab and carry out *their great project*'.⁴² On 19 June he received another letter from the nawab, written on 10 June, in which the latter asked him to remain in Patna and 'not to be disquietened about him in any way'.⁴³ He heard some rumours in Patna on 20 June that the British were preparing to march towards

Murshidabad and on 22 June he wrote to Sirajuddaula begging him to wait for his arrival as he feared he would engage the enemy at an unsuitable time'.⁴⁴ And that what happened exactly and everything was finished by 23 June.

One of main reasons for Sirajuddaula's lack of resolution and his vacillation was the fear of an Afghan invasion under Ahmad Shah Abdali, which was a constant anxiety to him from the early 1757. Intimidated by the possibility of an Afghan invasion, which appeared to him as a greater threat than the British design, he had given one reluctant but genuine concession after another to the British to appease them. All his actions so far had shown that Sirajuddaula remained anxious to avoid an open conflict with the British. Abdali had sacked Delhi and the neighbouring region in February 1757 and thought he retired from Delhi around 3 April, the danger that the Afghans might move against Bengal still remained as strong as ever. The nawab's best troops were developed under Raja Ramnarain to the Bihar frontier to meet the Afghan challenge. This resulted in a serious division of Sirajuddaula's forces and what were left were mostly troops under unreliable commanders.⁴⁵ But towards the end of April Abdali began to return to his country and the nawab wrote to Clive that there was no longer any threat of an Afghan invasion of Bengal and as such, the British assistance was no longer necessary. A little more confident now by the news of Abdali's withdrawal, Sirajuddaula wrote to Clive that the latter should not continue his march towards Murshidabad, as this would be in defiance of the treaty and tantamount to breaking of the treaty.⁴⁶ At the same time he ordered Mir Jafar to go to Plassey with fifteen thousand men to reinforce Roy Durlabh Ram who had been camping there for a month. Freed from the anxiety of a possible Afghan invasion, Sirajuddaula seems to have meant business now. Watts understood the situation well and wrote to Clive on 28 April:...'Nabob is very uppish....I request you will order your army to Calcutta and keep only garrison in Chandernagore, and appear to give over all thoughts of war, and send your people nowhere but keep all quiet'.⁴⁷

But the British, set on as they were to bring about the revolution, went ahead with their intrigues. The Select Committee deliberated that 'a revolution so generally wished for, that it is probable that the step will be attempted (and successfully too) whether we give our assistance or not'. It tried to justify the British role in the conspiracy stating that 'it would be a great error in politics to remain idle and unconcerned spectators of an event, wherein by engaging as allies to the person designed to be set up we benefit our Employers and the community very considerably'.⁴⁸ And for the British, it was a time for diplomacy,

dissimulation and soothing letters to Sirajuddaula. As the conspiracy was not yet ripe, Clive decided to back down a little and wrote to the nawab that he had ordered the greatest part of his army to Calcutta and would also be sending there all his field cannons. He delicately suggested to the nawab that, in return, he too should withdraw his own troops.⁴⁹ But this time, however, the nawab was past the stage of being soothed. His forces remained at Plassey and it was at this point that he recalled Law to Murshidabad. If Law had decided to come, it is doubtful whether the British victory at Plassey would have turned out as decisive as it had proved to be.

By a strange stroke of luck, the British found another way to deceive Sirajuddaula and convince him wrongly of their sincerity. They received a letter from an emissary of Peshwa Balaji Rao around 9/10 May offering an alliance with them against the nawab, promising the support of 120,000 Maratha cavalry and reimbursement of British losses in Calcutta 'by double of its value'. The Marathas were also supposed to have requested the British not to make peace with the nawab on any account. Clive's first reaction was that the letter was forged and 'an invention of the Soubah to sound his intentions', though Scafton mentions that Clive had a private conference with the bearer of the letter.⁵⁰ But he decided to use this for his twin purposes. On the one hand, he asked Watts to acquaint Mir Jafar of the Maratha letter in the expectation that the apprehension of such an invasion would force him to accelerate the project of a revolution; on the other, to send Scafton with the letter to the nawab as another proof of the sincerity of the British.⁵¹ The resolution of the Select Committee (12 May) on the Maratha letter betrays the British duplicity as also the fact that they were ready to use any weapon to get rid of Sirajuddaula.⁵²

'We are unanimous in the opinion that the Marattoe government is the worst in the world, and ought not to be set up if we can avoid it, for which reason, we prefer the project of establishing Meer Jafar in the subaship if it can be any way effected. But as it is possible that *our scheme for that work may miscarry*, and we may be involved again in a war with the Nabob in which case the assistance of the Marattoes/and the diversion they can make in the different parts of the country/ may be extremely useful, it is therefore *esteemed right to keep upon a good terms with Bajeray, to open a friendly correspondence with him, neither to decline absolutely nor accept of this offer*'

Luke Scafton took the letter to Murshidabad. Sirajuddaula was suspicious in the beginning but Scafton was apparently able to allay his fears. And the British policy had the desired effect. The nawab 'broke forth into loud acclamations to the Colonel's praise' and even

announced that he was asking his commanders-Roy Durlabh Ram, Mir Jafar and Mir Mardan- to return to Murshidabad from a great threat to the conspiracy and as such, Watts was contemplating to write to Mir Jafar warning him not to move. However, the nawab changed his mind and recalled all the three commanders to the capital.⁵³ Mir Jafar returned to Murshidabad on 30 May.

By now, the conspiracy was publicly talked of. The nawab suspected Mir Jafar of intrigues and dismissed him from the office of *bakshi* and conferred it on Khwaja Abdul Hadi Khan. Karam Ali, the author of *Muzaffarnamah* observed that Sirajuddaula, even after informed about the designs of his enemies, 'remained sunk in negligence and enjoyment of pleasure' while his confidants, especially Mir Mardan and Khwaja Abdul Hadi Khan, 'grieved at this slothfulness'.⁵⁴ But this was perhaps not quite true. It seems that Sirajuddaula became nervous and confused at the knowledge of the conspiracy and the suspicion of a possible British attack. So he was too sacred to alienate completely even those whom he suspected to be involved in the intrigues against him. Perhaps he still hoped that he would be able to put up a united stand against the British if the latter attacked him. And that was the reason why he soon reconciled Mir Jafar and Khadim Hussain Khan, restored them to their former offices and they promised allegiance under oath of fidelity to the nawab.⁵⁵

There is little doubt that Sirajuddaula's greatest mistake was not to take firm action against Mir Jafar and his co-conspirators. As a matter of fact, his loyal commanders suggested such a course of action. It is said that Khwaja Abdul Hadi Khan and Mir Mardan warned Sirajuddaula in the following vein:⁵⁶

'The predominance of the English has passed the limit of moderation, and they have determined to conquer this country.....Mir Md. Jafar Khan is treacherously bent on ruining this royal house; he should be first destroyed and then it will become easy to deal with the English'.

A sound advice no doubt. But as the Persian chronicler puts it, some 'traitors' advised him that without assembling a vast army, it would be almost impossible to fight the British and hence it was necessary to conciliate Mir Jafar and others. So Sirajuddaula gave up the ideal of punishing his enemies and went for reconciliation. But Mir Mardan cautioned him again to which the latter did not pay any heed:⁵⁷

'One ought to be very careful about his mortal enemy. At this time we ought not to expect any good service from these sardars. We ought to put them down first, so that the English, on hearing the news, will of themselves take to flight. The presence of these two [Mir Jafar

and Khadim Hussain Khan] in our camp will be the distraction and anxiety to us (loyal generals), and they are sure to practise treachery'.

Even Scrafton emphasised the blunder Sirajuddaula made in not taking action against Mir Jafar. He wrote that the nawab was sensible of his weakness 'but instead of having resolution to rise above it, and terminating his fear at once by the attack of Meer Jafar, he endeavoured to deceive him by the thin disguise of grace and pardon confirmed by oaths'.⁵⁸ Law too pointed out Sirajuddaula's folly in not firmly dealing with the conspirators. He observed that 'instead of recognising that he had been betrayed, Siraj reconciled himself with Mir Jafar who to hide his perfidy swears on the Koran to be faithful, and at once the Nawab is satisfied'.⁵⁹ He was wondering when Sirajuddaula must have known the ill will of Mir Jafar, Jagat Seths and others towards him, 'why then he did not try to anticipate their designs? He himself gave the answer':⁶⁰

'I see no other reason for this illogical behaviour except the isolation in which he found himself by the sickness of Mohan Lal. He did not know in whom to trust, or rather he wished to appear to trust his enemies in the hope of deceiving them, and of getting an advantage by hoodwinking them till the occasion was favourable for breaking out'.

Indeed, Mohanlal's illness, who was suspected to be poisoned by his enemies, was the most crucial factor, which tilted the balance against the nawab and in favour of the conspirators, including the British. As Yousuf Ali noted, he was like a 'firm pillar' to Sirajuddaula.⁶¹

Though Law branded him as 'greatest scoundrel' (probably out of sheer frustration that Mohanlal did not persuade the nawab to intervene in favour of the French against the British attack on Chandernagore and prevent Law's banishment from Murshidabad), he had to acknowledge that Mohanlal was the person badly needed at the time to meet the challenge faced by Sirajuddaula. He wrote:⁶²

'Sworn enemy of the Seths and capable of opposing them, I have the idea that the *saukars* [Jagat Seths] would not have succeeded so easily in their project had he been free to act. But, unfortunately for us, he had been for some time, and was at this most critical moment, dangerously ill.... There is strong reason to believe he had been poisoned. By this [accident] Siraj-uddaula saw himself deprived of his only support'.

By now the conspiracy was reaching fruition and Watts planning his escape from Murshidabad. The flight of Watts on 12 June gave Sirajuddaula the real scare and he was now convinced of the British

design. Clive sent his ultimatum on 13 June and the nawab wrote back to him:⁶³

‘[Watt]s escape] appears to be done with a very deceitful design and intention to break the treaty. For certainly without your orders and directions Mr. Watts would never have acted in this manner. It was the consideration that something of this kind was contriving that hindered me from recalling the army from Plassey for I knew some trick was intended. I thank God, however, the treaty has not been broke on my part’.

Sirajuddaula frantically wrote to Law to come to his aid. There were rumours galore that Bussy was planning to enter Bengal. The possibility of French intervention was still a worry for the British and the last hope for the nawab. Some of his advisers again put pressure on him to arrest Mir Jafar but yet again, possibly in order to avoid a rift in the army at this critical moment, he tried to conciliate his ambitious commmander. Mir Jafar described the nawab’s attempts to woo him in a letter to Omar Beg, his confidant, on 19 June:⁶⁴

‘Mr Watt’s news was known early on Monday. This startled the Nabob, he thought it absolutely necessary I should be soothed, he came to me himself. On Thursday eve the Hughly letter arrived that they were marched. I was to be with him. On three conditions I consented to it. One, that I would not enter into his service; 2ndly, I would not visit him; lastly, I would not take part in the army. I sent him word that if he agreed to these terms was ready. As he wanted me he consented. But I took this writing from all the commanders of the army and artilllery. ‘That when they had conquered the English they should be bound to see me and my family safe wherever I chose to go’.

Almost humiliating terms for Sirajuddaula but yet he accepted them in all sincerity only for the sake of a united front against the British but only in vain as Mir Jafar was to betray him only a few days later. The stage for Plassey was now finally set. The conspiracy was ripe. Watts and Scafton had done everything possible to ensure its success. The treaty with Mir Jafar was signed, sealed and handed over to the British. The blueprints for treachery had been drawn upon and finalised. Plassey became inevitable and there was no turning back from the road to Plassey.

It is clear from the above analysis that it was the British who were extremely anxious to bring about the revolution. It also reiterates my general thesis, which has been elaborated by me in several publications in the last few years, that it was the British who played the major role in the origin and development of the Plassey consipracy and that without their active involvement the conspiracy would not have

matured enough to bring about the downfall of the nawab, leading to the British conquest of Bengal.⁶⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Watts to Clive, 3 June 1757, S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-57*, vol. II, London, 1905 (henceforth Hill) 397.
3. Select Committee Proceedings, 11 June 1757, Orme MSS. India, (India Office Library, London), V. ff. 1232-33; O.V. 170, ff.256-57; emphasis added.
4. Watts to Clive, 6 June 1757, Hill, II, 400; 7 June 1757. Hill, 400.
5. William Watts, *Memoirs of the Revolution in Bengal*, London, 1964, 107; Hill, II, 400; Watts to Clive, 11 June 1757, Hill, II, 401, 403.
6. Watts to Clive, 9 June 1757. Hills, II,403; Watts' *Memoirs*, 98.
7. Luke Scrafton, *Reflections on the Government of Indostan*, London, 1763, 88-89; Watts to Clive, 8,9 & 11 June 1757, Hill, II,401, 403.
8. Scrafton, *Reflections*, 91-92; Watts' *Memories*, 98.
9. Jean Law, *Memoir*, Hill, III, 212.
10. Watts' *Memoirs*, 104-105.
11. Clive to Shaikh Amirullah, 11 June 1757, Hill,II, 404.
12. Shaikh Amirullah to Clive, 12 June 1757. Hill,II, 405.
13. There was no such article in the treaty of Alinagar. Siraj wrote this in his private letters to the British (to Watson, 9 Feb. 1757, Hill, II, 220; to Clive, 11 Feb. 1757, Hill, II,222) to assure them of his friendship. As clearly pointed out by Watts, the nawab did not violated the treaty even if he had corresponded with the French (Watts to Clive, 26 April 1757, Hill, II, 362-63). Simialr promise was also made by the British to the nawab which they never kept (Watson to the Nawab, 9 Feb.1757, II,221).
14. Clive to Nawab, 13 June 1757, Hill, II,405-7.
15. Nawab to Watson, 13 June 1757, Hill, II,410; Nawab to Clive,15 June 1757, Hill, II,411.
16. Watts' *Memoirs*, 108; Scrafton, *Reflections*, 92.
17. Clive to Select Committee,19 June 1757, Hill,II,417-18.
18. Ibid., 418.
19. Clive to Mir Jafar, 19 June 1757, Hill, II, 417; emphasis added.
20. Clive to Select Committee, 21 June 1757.Hill, II, 419.
21. Select Committee Proceedings, 23 June 1757. Hill, II, 421-23.
22. Clive to Select Committee, 27 June 1757, Hill, II,431.
23. Clive to Select Committee,21 June 1757, Hill, II, 419.
24. Journal of Eyre Coote, Orme Mss., India, VII, f. 1665; Hill, III, 54.

25. Ibid.
26. Clive to Mir Jafar, 22 June 1757 (no.1), Hill, II, 420-21; Mir Jafar to Clive, Recd. 22 June at 3 p.m., Hill-II, 420, Clive to Mir Jafar, 22 June 1757 (no.2), despatched at 5 p.m., Hill, II 421, emphasis added.
27. Clive to Mir Jafar, 22 June 1757, Hill, II, 421.
28. Sirajuddaula to Clive, 29 March 1757, Hill, II, 295; Scrafton, *Reflections*, 79.
29. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III, 199.
30. Sirajuddaula to Bussy, March 1757, Hill, II, 314.
31. A.K. Moitra, *Sirajuddaula*, (In Bengali), Calcutta, 6th edn. B.S. 1332, 287; Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III, 196.
32. Clive to Watts, 24 March 1757, Orme Mss. India XI, ff. 2752-54; emphasis added.
33. Clive to Governor Pigot, 29 March 1757. Hill, II, 303.
34. Clive to Sirajuddaula, 29 March 1757, Hill, II, 304.
35. Sirajuddaula to Clive, 8 April 1757, Hill, II, 316.
36. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III, 208.
37. Ibid., 202-210.
38. Ibid., 205.
39. Ibid., 206.
40. Gholam Hossein Khan, *Seir Mutakherin*. Vol. II, trans, Haji Mustafa, Second Reprint, Lahore, 1975, 227.
41. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, vol. III, 208.
42. Ibid., 209-10; emphasis added.
43. Law suspected this to be a forged letter by one of nawab's secretaries who was bribed by the British, Hill, III, 210, f.n.1.
44. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III, 210-12.
45. Brijen K. Gupta, *Sirajuddaulah and the East India Company*, Leiden, 1962. 116-17.
46. Sirajuddaula to Clive, 26 April 1757, Hill, II, 361.
47. Watts to Clive, 28 April 1757, Hill, II, 367.
48. Select Committee Proceedings, 1 May 1757, Hill, II, 371.
49. Clive to Sirajuddaula, 2 May 1757, Hill, II, 372; 4 May 1757, Hill, II, 376-77.
50. Scrafton, *Reflections*. 84-85.
51. Clive to Watts, 11 May 1757, Hill, II, 378-79; 12 May 1757, Hill, II, 379; Clive to Sirajuddaula, 14 May 1757, Hill, II, 380; 20 May 1757. Hill, II, 390, Clive to Watts. 19 May 1757. Hill, II, 389. Watts thought that the letter was 'as trick of the Nabob', Watts to Clive, 17 May 1757, Hill, II, 386.
52. Select Committee Proceedings, Orme Mss., V. India, f. 1223; O.V. 170, f. 238; emphasis added.
53. Scrafton, *Reflections*, 85-86; Clive to Sirajuddaula, 25 May 1757, Hill, II, 394; Sirajuddaula to Clive, 27 May 1757, Hill, II, 394.
54. Karam Ali, *Muzaffarnamah*, in J. N. Sarkar, ed., *Bengal Nawabs*. Calcutta, 1952, 74.

55. Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz-us Salatin*, trans. Maulavi Abdus Salam, Calcutta. 1904. 374; Yusuf Ali Khan, *Tarikh-i-Bangala-i-Mahabatjangi*, trans. Abdus Subhan. Calcutta, 1982. 132; *Muzaffarnamah*, 74-75; Clive to Watts, 6 June 1757, Hill, II,400; Watts to Clive, 8 June 1757, Hill, II,401; 9 June, 1757, Hill, II, 403; 11 June, 1757, Hill, II,403; Scrafton, *Reflections*, 89, 91-92.
56. *Muzaffarnamah*. 74.
57. Ibid. 74-75.
58. Scrafton, *Reflections*. 91-92.
59. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III,211-12.
60. Ibid. 194.
61. *Tarikh-i-Bangala-i-Mahabatjangi*, 132.
62. Law's *Memoir*, Hill, III, 190; Both Karam Ali and Yusuf Ali also confirm that Mohanlal was dangerously ill on account of a 'deadly, incurable disease'. *Muzaffarnamah*. 70; *Tarikh-i-Bangala-i-Mahabatjangi*, 129.
63. Sirajuddaula to Clive, 15 June 1757, Hill, II, 411.
64. Mir Jafar to Omar Beg, 19 June 1757, Hill, II, 416; see also, *Muzaffarnamah*, 75.
65. S. Chaudhary, *From Prosperity to Decline : Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*. New Delhi, 1995; 'Sirajuddaula and the battle of Plassey', *History of Bangladesh*, Vol. I, 1992, 93-130; 'The Imperatives of Empire- Private Trade, Sub-Imperialism and the British Attack on Chandernagore, March 1757', *Studies in History*, Jan-June, 1992, 1-12; 'Trade, Bullion and Conquest- Bengal in the mid-Eighteenth Century', Presidential Address, Medieval India Section, Indian History Congress, Golden Jubilee Session, Gorakhpur, 1989.