The Battle of Palashi

Palashi, The Battle of was fought between Nawab Sirajuddoulah and the East India Company on 23 June 1757. It lasted for about eight hours and the nawab was defeated by the company because of the treachery of his leading general Mir Jafar. Palashi's political consequences were far-reaching and devastating and hence, though a mere skirmish, it has been magnified into a battle. It laid the foundation of the British rule in Bengal. For the English East India Company, Bengal was the springboard from which the British expanded their territorial domain and subsequently built up the empire which gradually engulfed most parts of India and ultimately many parts of Asia as well.

The Background The battle had a long background that could be traced from the beginning of the East India Company's settlement in Bengal in early 1650s. The Mughal rulers of Bengal allowed the East India Company to settle in Bengal and trade free of duty on payment of an annual sum of three thousand taka. Within a few years of their settlement at Hughli and Kasimbazar the company's trade began to expand rapidly both physically and in terms of capital investment. But their intrusion into the internal trade of Bengal became a cause of conflict between Shaista khan, the Mughal subahdar, and the English in the last quarter of the 17th century. After Shaista Khan had left Bengal the English were allowed to settle in Calcutta, purchase the zamindari rights over the three villages of Kalikata, Govindapur and Sutanuti. They established a fort at Calcutta and named it fort william.

The purchase of zamindari and the establishment of the Fort William proved highly profitable to the East India Company and the vested interest that was created in it led them to purchase more zamindari lands (38 villages) around Calcutta. Meanwhile the abuse of trade privileges progressively worsened their relations with the Bengal nawabs. The company's authority at Calcutta hardly paid any attention to the directives of the court of directors from London to stop this evil practice and the privileges of dastak was illegally extended from the import-export trade to cover also the internal trade. At the same time the servants of the company began to use the trade permit to cover their private trade.

The company in its attempt to secure more privileges approached the Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar, who by a farman (1717) granted it important privileges which included duty-free trade, establishment of a mint at Calcutta and right to purchase 38 villages on certain conditions. As other merchants had to pay duty at certain rates while the English and their partners traded duty-free, the local merchants were threatened to be eliminated from the internal trade. Nawab Murshid Quli Khan obstructed the implementation of the farman as he realised that in spite of the growing import-export trade of the company, it would escape with the annual payment of a meagre three thousand taka and the privileges would also deprive the government of its legitimate revenues from the internal trade as well as from the mint duties.

With the accession of Sirajuddoulah in April 1756, the conflict between the nawab and the English company became almost inevitable as the young nawab, for the first time, protested vehemently against the unlawful activities of the company in Bengal. He had three main grievances against the British-the unauthorized fortifications of Fort William, illegal private trade and shameless abuse of dastaks by the company servants, and illegal shelter given to the nawab's erring subjects. The nawab asked the British to take measures to remove his grievances and sent several diplomatic missions to Calcutta for amicable settlement of the dispute. The nawab demanded the extradition of Krishna Das and asked the English to demolish the new fortifications and ordered to fill up the ditch, which surrounded the Calcutta Settlement. The English insulted nawab's special envoy, who carried his letter to Calcutta. When Narayan Sing reported how unceremoniously Roger drake, the English governor of Calcutta, had dismissed him, nawab's temper was inflamed. Drake is reported to have said, 'the sooner he' [the nawab] came to Calcutta the better and he' [Drake] would make another nawab'.

The nawab immediately ordered his forces to surround the Kasimbazar factory. The factory chief surrendered but the company's governor at Calcutta became obstinate. There upon, the nawab marched upon Calcutta and captured it. The reestablishment of the company in Bengal after their defeat was possible in one of the two ways either surrendering to the nawab or to apply force to avenge the defeat. The British in Bengal appealed for urgent reinforcements to Fort St. George (Madras) which decided to send an expeditionary force under Robert clive and Admiral charles watson to Bengal. They recovered Calcutta in January 1757 and declared a manifesto of war against the nawab. At this Nawab Sirajuddoulah was compelled to sign the Alinagar treaty with the English.

The Conspiracy The tension of war continued as the English, disregarding the treaty, started hatching up a conspiracy with the disaffected courtiers of the nawab. There is no denial that a section of the influential members of the nawab's court at Murshidabad, who were dissatisfied with Sirajuddoulah, was trying to hatch a conspiracy to oust the nawab. But the point to emphasise is that without the active involvement of the British, there would have been in all probability no Palashi 'revolution'. It was the British who were more anxious than the other conspirators to put their own scheme of overthrowing the nawab. The company servants and other merchant adventurers closely connected with the British trade in India - though not so much the Company Directors in London - did from time to time advocate, in no uncertain terms, the acquisition of territories in India. The private trades of the company servants was facing a severe crisis in the mid-18th century and in order to retrieve their private trade fortunes, they took recourse to 'sub-imperialism'.

In fact, the seeds of the Palashi conspiracy were sown in the 'Instructions' of the Fort George Council (13 October 1756) which recommended 'not mere retaking of Calcutta' and 'ample reparations', but urged 'to effect a junction with any powers in the province of Bengal that might be dissatisfied with the violence of the Nawab's government or that might have pretensions to the

Nawabship'. The implication of the last portion of the recommendation is too obvious to be emphasised. Even Clive wrote before sailing from Madras that Sirajuddoulah was a weak prince and that most of his courtiers were dissatisfied. It was on this resentment at the court of the nawab that the British played 'the nice important game', as Clive reflected later on, and precipitated the conspiracy leading to the Palashi coup.

Both Clive and Orme (who was the official historian of the English East India Company and was in Bengal in the early 1750s) were aware of Colonel Scott's plan, prepared in Calcutta in 1752, of the conquest of Bengal, which was then with the Fort George Council. Clive was greatly impressed by the wealth of Bengal on an earlier visit to Calcutta in the winter of 1749-50. The British private trade was facing a severe crisis in the late 1740s and early 1750s because of the sudden spurt in the French private trade and Asian maritime trade under the Armenian merchant Khwaja Wajid as is borne out by the shipping lists in the Dutch records. So the destruction of the French, which would prevent a Franco-Bengali alliance, and the deposition of the nawab who was threatening to stop the illegal private trade and misuse of dastaks - both essential for rescuing the battered private trade fortunes of the British - became the main target of the company servants' sub-imperialism.

Despite the assertion of several historians that it was the Indian conspirators who got in touch with the British for cooperation in the proposed 'revolution', there can hardly be any doubt from a careful reading of the documents that it was the British who contacted the disgruntled elements in the court for their support in the British plan of the coup. On 9 April 1757, Luke Scrafton wrote from Kasimbazar to Clive's confidant, John Walsh, 'For God's sake let us proceed on some fixed plan. How glorious it would be for the Company to have a nawab devoted to them!' He wrote to Walsh again on April 18 about the plan of setting up Yar Latif Khan as the new nawab. Meanwhile the Select Committee adopted on April 23 the coup d'etat as its official policy. On that very day Clive requested the committee to permit Scrafton to remain in Murshidabad as he 'had affairs of consequence to employ him in'.

william watts and Scrafton were actively engaged in securing the support for the project at Murshidabad. Orme states that Clive, having received the information that Mir Jafar was not well disposed towards the nawab, advised Watts to cultivate his friendship. Watts and Scrafton communicated with Umichand, the prominent Calcutta merchant, and established contact with principal darbar officials. Yar Latif confided to Umichand, who was deputed by Watts, his desire to become nawab and that he would be supported by the diwan Ray Durlabh Ram and the Jagat Sheths, the powerful bankers. Watts jumped for the scheme immediately and communicated it to Clive, who approved it.

But another pretender soon appeared on the scene. Though Orme states that Mir Jafar conveyed his proposal through a Calcutta based Armenian merchant Khwaja Petruse, Watts himself however wrote to his father later on that it was he who 'applied' to Mir Jafar who 'with great

willingness entered into my scheme of complying with and signing any reasonable article on condition of his being made Nabob by our assistance'. The Select Committee in Calcutta resolved unanimously to support the revolution in favour of Mir Jafar, while Watts was entrusted to negotiate the terms for the settlement with him.

But the conspiracy was still in an embryonic stage and Mir Jafar could not yet be taken for granted. So Clive wrote to Watts on May 2 to assure Mir Jafar 'to fear nothing', that the British were 'strong enough to drive' the nawab out of the country and that he (Clive) would stand by him (Mir Jafar) as long as there was a man left. Mir Jafar was in Murshidabad since May 30 but Watts failed to conclude the agreement with him. It was only on June 5 that Watts could get the red (false one to hoodwink Umichand's claim) and white agreements signed by Mir Jafar.

The battle The agreement notwithstanding, the Select Committee became extremely anxious to put its plan of 'revolution' into execution. On June 11, it deliberated whether it would be 'most proper' to march directly towards Murshidabad or wait for further advice and a plan of operation from Mir Jafar. It was resolved unanimously that the 'present conjuncture is the most favourable that can offer to carry the project for a revolution in favour of Mir Jaffier into execution' because any further delay might have led to the discovery of the conspiracy by the nawab with the consequent elimination of Mir Jafar in which case 'our whole scheme' would be 'overset' and the British would be 'left to act against the united force of the country'. Accordingly Clive began his march towards Murshidabad on June 13.

On June 19 Clive reached Katwa, which was taken by Colonel Coote the previous day. Clive called a meeting of the War Council on June 21 when it was decided not to take 'an immediate action'. But later Clive changed his mind and decided to march the next day. At dawn on 22 June the British army under Clive set out for Palashi. However in the early afternoon of June 22, he received the long awaited communication from Mir Jafar and proceeded on his march towards Palashi, which he reached after midnight.

In the meantime the nawab had started from Murshidabad and encamped at Palashi to oppose the enemy. The war started at about 8 in the morning on 23 June 1757. Nawab's army under Mir Mardan, Mohanlal, Khwaja Abdul Hadi Khan, Naba Singh Hazari and a few others gave a brave fight while about two-thirds of the nawab's army under Mir Jafar, Yar Latif and Ray Durlabh Ram merely stood by and watched. Even after several hours of fighting, nothing decisive happened. Clive had not expected such a resistance and it is reported that Clive thought of returning to Calcutta in the darkness of night 'after giving the best fight during the day'. But around 3 in the afternoon a cannon ball struck Mir Mardan leading to his death.

Bewildered and baffled at Mir Mardan's death, Sirajuddoulah called Mir Jafar and implored him to save his life and honour. Mir Jafar advised the nawab to suspend action for the day and start afresh the next morning, and soon passed on the message to Clive. With the nawab's

commanders turning back, the British made a fresh onslaught and there followed a general rout. The battle was over by 5 in the afternoon and victorious Clive immediately proceeded towards Murshidabad. John Wood, a British soldier, who was present at Palashi, observed: 'such was this great and decisive battle by which a kingdom was conquered without there having been a general assault'.

The conspiracy and the subsequent Palashi 'revolution' was not only engineered and encouraged by the British but they tried their best till the last moment before the battle to persuade the Indian conspirators to stick to the British 'project'. The general notions that the conspiracy was 'Indian-born', that the British had no 'calculated plotting' behind it, that they had little or no role at all in the origin and/or development of the conspiracy, that it was the 'internal crisis' in Bengal which 'inevitably brought in the British' and that the British conquest of Bengal was almost 'accidental' are hardly tenable any more. The English won the victory at Palashi owing to the strength of their conspiracy leading to treason within Sirajuddaulah's camp. The defeat of the nawab was political and not a military one. [KM Mohsin and Sushil Chaudhury]

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