

The Black Hole Revisited

Subhendu Sarkar

One of the important events in the history of British India is certainly the Black Hole tragedy of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in June 1756. It served as a turning point in changing the relationship of the British and the Indians: from commercial relation based on mutual interest to colonial control through territorial conquest. From the very beginning the incident provided the British with an excuse for ruthless retaliation and subsequent control of the administrative power. The authenticity of the Black Hole episode, however, has always been doubtful. It is shrouded in mystery as the accounts left by both the survivors and the British East India Company servants widely differ from each other. It is these contradictions and inaccuracies that Jan Dalley deals with in his *book.

Though the first charter to trade was granted to the East India Company in 1600, it was only in 1717 that the British managed to secure from the Mughals, after a long process of diplomacy and gift-giving (read bribery), the permission to trade freely. The *farman* was seen as the Magna Carta of the Company in India. It exempted the British from paying local taxes and other demands that were levied by the Nawabs of Bengal. This, of course, irked Alivardi Khan and infuriated his grandson, Siraj-ud-daulah who after the death of Alivardi became the Nawab of Bengal. Aware of the fact that the British were deceiving him and showing signs of early expansionism, Siraj, soon after ascending the throne, headed to drive the foreigners out of Bengal. He marched to Calcutta with a huge army and won a fierce battle against a small British army. The Nawab's soldiers took possession of the Fort William on 20 June 1756 and confined the remaining defenders, till the following morning, in the Black Hole (a tiny cell built by the British to serve the purpose of the military lock-up). Most of the prisoners died due to crushing, suffocation and thirst. The incident has since then been regarded as a deliberate act of violence perpetrated by the barbaric tyrant Siraj. The account left by one of the survivors, John Zephaniah Holwell (the man who led the British forces after many officers including the governor fled from the scene) that portrayed the incident in the most horrible terms was infused into the mind of every British schoolchild and formed the basis of the myth about the barbarism of the Indians.

The victims came to be viewed by Lord Curzon as "men whose life-blood cemented the foundations of the British Empire in India." He raised a monument in memory of the victims at the heart of Calcutta. It was later removed in the wake of nationalist movement led by Subhas Chandra Bose. The phrase 'Black Hole' was so ingrained in the minds of the British public that it came to be used in varied contexts to mean "the existential fear of the unknown, of nothingness, of being lost and helpless in an unfathomable deep" (200).

Considering the whole episode as a construct of imperialist historiography, Dalley presents it in a balanced way. He carefully scans the accounts and delves deep into the issues of money, self-interest, racism and empire-building. Dispelling the idea that Siraj was responsible for locking up the defenders of the Fort William, Dalley states that the Nawab was disturbed by the losses he

suffered, with many thousands of soldiers dead. The violation of the ceasefire was perhaps the result of Omichand's slyness as the vindictive and rich Jain merchant who acted as an intermediary between the British and the Nawab had been badly treated by British governor. It is unlikely for Siraj to have broken his word. Besides, according to Holwell, the Nawab, after capturing the Fort, assured him repeatedly that no harm should come to him. Confining the hostages in the Black Hole was, by and large, the work of the guards of the Nawab's army as Siraj had retired from the place leaving the British contingent on the deserted parade ground. The guards, however, had no idea about the possible consequence of imprisoning the defenders.

As regards Holwell's report, Dalley is always doubtful. He writes :

"Throughout Holwell's account the reader is torn between horror and pity, and sheer disbelief... There is a plethora of petty information that seems fantastical and even preposterous the more we look at it ... It does, however, make us wonder why Holwell went to such trouble to embroider a description that turned what was undoubtedly a horrifying event into a vivid, Dantesque vision of hell. Perhaps because he was setting a scene in which any number of people could have met their deaths, and any precise count or identification of those who died was almost impossible. Of the victims, only a dozen or so are reliably identified; all we know about many others is that they disappeared at some point, perhaps during that Sunday night, perhaps before it. Several experiments have been done, in an effort to discredit Holwell's story, and it is clear that 146 adults simply cannot fit into a space the size of the Black Hole, unless they are piled on top of each other."
(163-64)

The real intention of Holwell was to impress the Directors of the Company and thereby climb up the career ladder. He eventually became the governor after returning to Calcutta but after a clash with Robert Clive and being ensnared in financial scandals ultimately had to resign from the Company. The wealth he amassed was, of course, sufficient enough to guarantee him a prosperous life after retirement.

Dalley not only probes into the Black Hole episode but also recounts the history of the British East India Company's activities in India up to the Battle of Plassey (1757) and beyond till 1765 when it was granted the diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. What is perhaps more interesting is the story of the fortune-seekers who accumulated enormous property as servants of the British East India Company. Thus people come to know about men like Elihu Yale who rose to the position of the governor of Madras. Being involved in financial irregularities he was finally dismissed from the service. But like Holwell and many others, Yale too, became immensely rich and on his return to London used a part of his wealth to endow a small American college that became one of the finest universities in the Ivy League. Then there is Thomas Pitt who founded a great political dynasty in England. Dalley comments :

"The colourful Thomas Pitt is a character who shines out, not only because his grandson and great-grandson became prime ministers, or because one of the world's most famous diamonds was named after him. Although the name now sounds respectable, Thomas Pitt was something of a rogue, one of the

men who hovered around the fringes of the Company's activities, spending a lot more time on his account than theirs."

Dalley's style is lucid, gripping and, at the same time, exploratory. Centering around the Black Hole episode, he recreates the changing world of British domination in India. The book is thoroughly enjoyable though the scholarly reader may find the absence of notes a bit awkward. However, the effort, on the whole, is praiseworthy as the author is successful in exposing the myth created by the British to justify their colonial operation. □□□

***THE BLACK HOLE : MONEY, MYTH AND EMPIRE**

by Jan Dalley, London: Penguin / Fig Tree, 2006. xvii+222. Rs. 295.