

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## The Battle of Plassey

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“It is not too much to say that the destiny of Europe hinged upon the conquest of Bengal, wrote the historian Brook Adams in 1896. People who look at today’s impoverished Bangladesh cannot imagine that in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the hub of the most prosperous region in Asia. The Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud Dawlah, ruled a territory extending from Dacca (Bangladesh) to Benares (northern India). The province had a population of 25 million; about four times the population of England at that time. The Ganges delta provided abundant rice, fish and jute. The province was bustling with manufacturing activity. The fine muslin cloth of Murshidabad was sought after the world over. Bengal also produced the finest steel, using iron ores imported from Tanzania in Africa.

Within a span of ten years after its capture by the British, Bengal, once the richest province in Asia, became destitute. To understand how it happened, one must examine the broader political developments in South Asia in the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The death of Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb (1707) let loose the centrifugal forces that were kept in check by the indefatigable energy of the aging Emperor. Prince Muazzam, who was already in his sixties, was hastily called back from Kabul to Delhi, and ascended the throne in the Red Fort under the title of Bahadur Shah. By this time, the empire was in turmoil. The Maratha advance in the Deccan was in full swing. A truce between the Moghuls and the Sikhs broke down after the assassination of Guru Govind Singh (1708) and a full-scale uprising erupted in the Punjab under Banda Singh. Bahadur Shah spent a greater portion of his tenure in office containing the Sikh revolt. Although the Moghul armies recaptured the principal cities, the Sikhs continued their guerilla war from the hills in northern Punjab. Bahadur Shah, tired of these campaigns, died in 1712.

Court intrigue took over the Moghul court. Azim us Shan the heir apparent, and two of his brothers, were murdered at the instigation of Zulfiqar Khan, a general in the army. In his place, Jahandar Shah, a debaucher who spent all his time with his concubine Lal Kunwar, was hoisted as the new king. Enraged at the murder of his father, Farrukhsiyar (1713-1719), the eldest son of Azim us Shan, raised an army in Bengal, and marched on Delhi with the help of two Sayyid brothers, Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali. Jahandar and Zulfiqar were both killed. The two Ali brothers gained enormous power in the court. Hussain Ali obtained the regency of the Deccan as payment for his services. But a rift developed between Hassan Ali and the Emperor; the Ali brothers blinded Farrukhsiyar and imprisoned him until death. Raushan Akhtar, a grandson of Muhammed Shah, was made the king. Raushan broke the stranglehold of the Ali brothers by forging an alliance with Afghan and Irani nobles.

One of the Afghan nobles, Chin Qilich Khan, was given the title of Nizam ul Mulk and was made the divan. He tried to arrest the decay in the empire, but the rot was too far-gone. Disgusted, he left for the Deccan in 1723, where he founded the state of Hyderabad, which lasted until 1948. Similarly, Bengal and Oudh broke away in 1722. These provinces accounted for the bulk of Moghul revenues. Although the local rulers continued to acknowledge Moghul overlordship, they were all but independent. Meanwhile, the Marathas consolidated their hold on central India. In 1732, they occupied the province of Gujrat, cutting off the important trading center of Surat from Delhi. Under the leadership of Baji Rao, they moved north and reached the suburbs of Delhi in 1737. Alarmed at the Maratha advance, the Emperor recalled the Nizam from Hyderabad. But international events overtook the turmoil in India at this juncture.

The disintegration of the Safavid Empire and the occupation of its capital by the Afghans in 1722 invited intervention from the Russians and Ottomans. The Persians rallied under Nadir Quli, a general in the Safavid army, drove the Russians out, and won their territories back from the Ottomans. Nadir tried to interest the Safavid Shah Tahmasp II in the affairs of state, but finding him incompetent, dethroned him, and declared himself Nadir Shah of Persia (1736).

Once the Russian menace had been contained, Nadir turned his attention to the east towards Qandahar from where the Afghans had launched an invasion of Persia. Nadir Shah appealed to the Moghul Emperor Muhammed Shah for his help in preventing the Afghan rebels from escaping to Kabul. In the bureaucratic machinery of the Moghul court, it is not even certain that the Emperor was briefed on the full import of events in Persia and Afghanistan. The reply from Delhi was ambiguous. The irate Nadir Shah captured Qandahar in 1737, and in hot pursuit of the rebels, moved to Kabul in 1738. He would not overlook the indifference of the Delhi court to his appeal. He crossed the Khaiber Pass in the winter of 1738, and took Peshawar. Moving forward, in 1739, he occupied Lahore and sent word to Delhi that he "had arrived in India to punish the courtiers who had shown him disrespect".

The gauntlet was thrown. The Moghul armies moved towards Karnal in Punjab to meet Nadir Shah. The Persians avoided the main Indian force. Instead, they raided auxiliary troops, which were being brought in by the Moghul generals, cutting down the Indian forces one by one. Camels loaded with gunpowder were let loose on the Indian formations, causing havoc on the infantry and elephant corps alike. In one of the skirmishes, the commander-in-chief of the Indian army, Khan e Dauran, was killed, and Burhan ul Mulk, governor of Oudh was captured. With the Moghul armies in disarray, the Moghul emperor sued for peace.

Once he was in captivity, the treacherous Burhan ul Mulk turned against his own Emperor, and advised the Persian monarch to demand an indemnity of twenty million rupees from the Moghul. He also demanded the position of commander-in-chief of the disarrayed Moghul armies. Muhammed Shah gave the job instead to Nizam ul Mulk. The irate Burhan ul Mulk advised the Persian invader to up the ante and move on Delhi. A face saving formula was arranged, and the humbled Moghul Emperor led the victorious Nadir Shah into the capital, presumably as his "guest". While negotiations were going on about the indemnity, a rumor spread that Nadir had been killed. The ill-advised citizens of Delhi went on a rampage and killed several hundred Persian soldiers. Enraged, Nadir Shah gave orders for a general slaughter. Not since the invasion of Timur had Delhi seen such destruction. Over a hundred thousand citizens were butchered. Peace was restored after Muhammed Shah offered one of his grand daughters in marriage to the son of Nadir Shah. The peacock throne of Shah Jehan, together with the entire collection of gold, diamonds and rubies in the Moghul treasury was given away as "dowry". In addition, Nadir's soldiers tortured the nobles into giving up vast amounts of hoarded wealth. It is said that Nadir required 70 camels to load up the gold and the precious stones. So large was the amount of

loot that upon returning to Persia, Nadir Shah forgave the collection of taxes in his vast empire for three years. He also annexed all the territories to the west of the Indus River, comprising most of what is today Pakistan.

Nadir Shah's invasion destroyed whatever remained of the prestige of the Moghul emperor. The Marathas moved to fill the political military vacuum, advancing from central India towards Delhi. The Sikhs regrouped and rejoined their armed struggle in the Punjab. Bengal, Oudh, and Hyderabad practically became independent. Without the revenues of these vast provinces, the Moghul Empire became but a shadow of its old self. Its hold now diminished to a few square miles around Delhi.

With the Moghul Empire in ruins, the focus shifted to its successor states in the provinces. The Moghul Emperors had appointed nawabs (governors) to run each of the major provinces. With the empire in disarray, these nawabs became independent. The capable administrators Nawab Murshad Quli Khan and Nawab Aliwardi Khan governed the large province of Bengal (1722-1756). When Aliwardi died in 1756, his grandson Siraj ad Daula became the Nawab. This upset Mir Ja'afar, a brother-in-law of Siraj, who had hoped to be the next Nawab. The Bengali court in Murshidabad became a cobweb of plots and counter plots. These court intrigues provided an opening for the British who were not content with commercial expansion in Bengal, but wanted political control as well. When the East India Company reinforced Fort William in Calcutta against his expressed wishes, Siraj ad Dawla was furious. At his orders, 155 Englishmen were locked up in a small chamber barely large enough to accommodate half as many. Most of the hapless prisoners did not survive the summer heat of Bengal, and the British dubbed the death chamber the "Black Hole of Calcutta".

The battle lines were now drawn. By 1757, Britain was by far the paramount sea power in the world. It had displaced the Dutch, outmaneuvered the French, and established itself in America and Asia alike. Its holdings included colonies in America, Canada, West Africa, India and Australia. The slave trade had made England rich and its horizons now reached out to the control of the great landmass of Asia and Africa. On the Indian subcontinent the British East India Company held the strategic ports of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Robert Clive, a shrewd and capable administrator who had outfoxed the French in southern India, led the Company affairs. Clive knew through his agents the intrigues in Murshidabad, and made a deal with Mir Ja'afar. In return for the latter's support against Siraj ad Dawlah, Clive promised him the Nawabship of Bengal. The *zamindars* and bankers of Bengal also joined Clive's camp.

On June 28, 1757, at the Battle of Plassey, a day marked with infamy in the history of India, the Bengal forces met the British. The Bengal army had 50,000 troops commanded by Mir Ja'afar. The British contingent was barely 3,000 strong. As soon as the battle began, Mir Ja'afar betrayed Siraj ad Dawla, and went over to the British with the bulk of his army. Siraj ad Dawla was killed in the first hour of combat. With Bengal at his feet, Clive appointed Mir Ja'afar the nawab. In return, Mir Ja'afar showered the British with untold riches. Clive himself received a million pounds in gold and precious stones. Taxes for the East India Company were forgiven. But when the wily Mir Ja'afar showed his reluctance to part with additional wealth, Clive replaced him with another satrap, Mir Qasim. The East India Company had by now a taste of the wealth of Bengal, accumulated over centuries of opulent Moghul rule. Unable to satiate the unquenchable greed of the Company, Mir Qasim traveled westward to ask for help from the Nawab of Oudh in expelling the British. Oudh, in turn, requested assistance from the Moghul court in Delhi. Without financial resources, the Moghuls could not sustain an army. Only eighteen years separated the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah (1739) from the Battle of Plassey (1757). The Moghul armies were a shadow of their former self. Nonetheless the Emperor sent a contingent to help the Nawab of Oudh. The Indian armies met the British at the Battle of Buxor (1764). By now, the British could field more than 10,000 troops plus an equal number of Indian Sepoys. The armies were well supplied with

cannon and rifles. The Indians suffered a disastrous defeat. Under the terms of capitulation, the Moghul Emperor surrendered to the British the revenues from Bengal, Bihar and most of the United Provinces. The document signed at the termination of the Battle of Buxor became the legal basis for the British Raj (British rule).

What Robert Clive started, his successor, Warren Hastings completed. With the instincts of a cold, ruthless extortionist, Hastings used every administrative trick in his bag to extract the last ounce of gold from Hindus and Muslims alike. He imposed hefty taxes on Indian manufactures while flooding the Indian market with cheap cotton goods manufactured in Lancashire. He waged war on the Afghans of Rohilkhand, pillaging the northern territories as he went. He starved the Begums (princesses) of Oudh and tortured their servants using another traitor Asif ud Dawlah as his tool, until the Begums surrendered more than a million pounds in state jewels. Within a span of ten years, Bengal was on its knees. What was once the richest province of Asia was now broke. Famine set in in 1765 and the streets of Calcutta were littered with corpses.

The transfer of this immense treasure from Bengal made possible the Industrial Revolution in Europe. It is significant that historians date the Industrial Revolution from 1758, one year after the Battle of Plassey. Capital is the energy that gives momentum to invention. Without capital, inventions have as much power as dead rocks. The infusion of capital into England accelerated innovation. Inventions appeared in rapid succession. The flying shuttle was invented in 1760, the spinning jenny in 1764, the steam engine in 1768 and the "mule" in 1779. Before the Battle of Plassey, the iron and steel industry in England was no more advanced than that in Bengal. Within a generation after Plassey, Europe had far outstripped Asia in technology.

Some scholars have dated the turning point in relations between the Islamic world and Europe from 1799, the year Napoleon landed in Egypt. This date misses the mark by more than forty years. By the time Napoleon invaded Egypt, the wheels of fortune had turned, and it was too late for the Islamic world. The Industrial Revolution had been in full swing for more than a generation. *Napoleon's triumph over the Turks in Egypt was only a symptom of the technological superiority achieved by Europe over Asia. The real historic hinge was the Battle of Plassey, fought on the sweaty swamps of Bengal in 1757.*

The loot from Bengal heralded the onset of the capitalist society. Industrialization further consolidated the accumulation of capital. With the wealth of Bengal at their command, the British successfully fought off Tippu Sultan of Mysore (1770-1799) and subdued India. With the resources of the great subcontinent of India at its command, European colonization of Asia and Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was only a footnote.

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