

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Tippu Sultan

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

The year 1799 marks a watershed on the Islamic calendar. It was the year that Napoleon landed his troops in Egypt. It was also the year that the British stormed the Fort of Srirangapatam, and the curtain fell on Islamic rule in India. The first event, the landing of French troops in Ottoman Egypt, confirmed the superiority of European arms and organization over the Ottomans. The second, the fall of Mysore, completed the political implosion of India and the consolidation of the British Empire. British arms did not conquer India. It fell apart through its own internal divisions and was handed over to the British by individual traitors.

Tippu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore in South India as a contemporary of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, Louis XVI, George III and Napoleon Bonaparte. In more ways than one, the paths of these historical figures crossed those of Tippu. It is an irony of history that the triumph of George Washington and the independence of America had an impact on the military fortunes of Tippu Sultan in far-away Mysore. After the British General Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at the Battle of Yorktown (1781), he returned to England and was hired by the East India Company. It was Cornwallis who organized a sustained and determined political and military offensive against Tippu Sultan that finally contained the Sultan's explosive energies.

Tippu's life spanned a period when new ideas and new institutions transformed the landscape of Europe and North America, while Asia recoiled from within. It was the age of the Industrial Revolution. Starting with the invention of the steam engine in 1758, Europe forged ahead in consolidating its technological superiority over the rest of the world. It was the age of the American Revolution (1776) and the eloquent assertion of the rights of man by Thomas Jefferson. It was also the age of the French Revolution (1789) and the abolition of oppressive feudalism in continental Europe. Tippu's existential vision reached out to the ideas in these momentous changes. But he lived in an environment that had lost its social, political and spiritual vitality, and he was done-in by his own people, while America and Europe moved forward to the modern age.

Tippu, son of Hyder Ali, was born in 1750 at Devanahalli and was named after Tippu Mastan Awliya of Arcot, to whose tomb his mother had made a pilgrimage. Tippu's forefather Shaykh Wali Muhammed, a Sufi Shaykh of the Chishtiya order from the Punjab, was ordered south by his teacher to serve the area of Gulbarga near the modern city of Bangalore, where the tomb of Shaykh Gaysu Daraz (d. 1410) is located. Shaykh Wali's grandson Fath Muhammed served, for a while, as a commander in the armies of the Nawab of Arcot during the reign of Aurangzeb (d. 1707). Fath Muhammed migrated further inland, and

found himself in the service of the Nawab of Sira, where he married the daughter of the Shaykh of Tanjore. While living in the village of Devanahalli, a son was born to the couple, and he was named Muhammed Ali. This lad, growing up in a soldier's family, showed his mettle early in his career, and soon found himself as a platoon commander in the service of the Raja of Mysore.

The political landscape of India changed while Fath Muhammed was in the service of the Nawab of Sira. Between 1680 and 1690, Moghul armies under Emperor Aurangzeb swept through southern India and extended their sway almost to the tip of the peninsula. Following the death of Aurangzeb (1707), there emerged no successor capable of holding the vast empire together. The provincial governors, while paying lip service to the lordship of the Emperor, asserted their independence. In 1722, Nizam ul Mulk, Asif Jah I, was sent to Golkunda (modern Hyderabad) as the governor of the southern provinces. The Nizam skillfully manipulated his affairs so that the governorship of the area became hereditary, and his descendants came to be known as the Nizams of Hyderabad. His official title was the *subedar* (provincial governor) of Deccan. This province was rich and vast, comprising an area larger than England, and included all territories contiguous to the modern metropolitan cities of Hyderabad, Bangalore and Madras. It had an income of over 200 million rupees, which was roughly a fifth of the entire income of the Moghul Empire.

For administrative purposes, the *suba* (province) of Hyderabad was divided into two sub-districts, each one governed by a nawab (the literal meaning of the word in Farsi is a "deputy". The English corrupted it to nabob.). The first sub-district was Sira, located 60 miles west of modern Bangalore. Sira was the administrative capital of Mysore and the coastal areas of Malabar, including the rich trading centers of Cochin and Mangalore. The other sub-district was Arcot, located 200 miles southeast of Hyderabad, which administered the coastal areas on the east coast included in modern Telangana and Madras.

Meanwhile, a strong power had emerged in western India. The Marathas, arising out of the hills around Poona, were welded into an effective fighting force by Shivaji. By 1720, they were in effective control of west central India and were elbowing their way east into the Nizam's territories, pushing their way north towards the heartland of the Moghul territories. Like the Nizams of Hyderabad, the Marathas too evolved a hereditary line of succession called the Peshwas.

The political disintegration of the Moghul Empire was an opportunity for the European powers. The British East India Company, set up in 1600 in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, had established its "factories" in three areas: Madras (1640), Bombay (1649) and Calcutta (1670). The French, following on the heels of the English, had their own *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*, and set up their "factory" at Pondicherry on the Bay of Bengal, about 100 miles south of Madras. The global rivalry between the French and the British, which had intense moments in West Africa and North America, spilled over into the Indian Ocean and India.

The first opportunity for European intervention in Indian affairs came from Hyderabad. Following the death of Asif Jah I, disagreements arose among his descendants, and open warfare erupted. In 1749, it pitted Nasir Jung, second son of the Nizam, against Muzaffar Jung, a grandson. At about the same time, a struggle arose for the Nawabship of Arcot (modern Tamil Nadu) between Muhammed Ali and Chanda Saheb. These fateful struggles dragged in the French, the British and the Mysoreans. The British sided with Nasir Jung and Muhammad Ali, while the French championed Muzaffar Jung and Chanda Saheb. Since Mysore was a part of the *suba* of Hyderabad, Nasir Jung requisitioned a contingent of 15,000 troops from Mysore. Hyder Ali was a part of this contingent. He distinguished himself in combat, and upon his return, was made a regional commander by the Raja of Mysore.

The contests in Hyderabad and Arcot ended in favor of the British. The French Governor Dupleix was outwitted by the British Governor Robert Clive, and returned to France a disheartened man. A few years later, the British gained a decisive advantage in India as a result of their victory over the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey (1757). The Anglo-French wars, fought on and off for twenty years on the global stage, came to an end with the Treaty of Paris (1763) by which the French washed their hands of India and essentially gave up their struggle in North America.

Meanwhile, the wheels of fortune turned. In 1761, the Afghan Emir, Ahmed Shah Abdali, at the Battle of Panipat, crushed the Maratha armies, which had penetrated as far north as Lahore in the Punjab. The Marathas, recoiling from the tremendous loss of manpower in the battle (some historians put this loss at over 150,000 men), recalled their armed forces dispersed over the subcontinent. Mysore, which had suffered periodic invasions from the Marathas, was a beneficiary. In 1762, the Mysore armies under Hyder Ali expelled the Marathas. By 1765, Hyder Ali had become the de-facto power in Mysore, while the Raja and his family receded into the background. The rising power of Mysore roiled the Nizam, the Marathas, and the British alike. In addition, the continuing contest for succession in Arcot provided plenty of opportunity for alliances and counter alliances. The result was a series of wars, with Mysore as the central player in the test of arms.

The first Mysore War was fought between August 1767 and March 1768, with the British championing the cause of the profligate Muhammed Ali, Nawab of Arcot, while Hyder Ali of Mysore championed the cause of Mahfuz Khan, elder brother of Muhammed Ali. The fickle Nizam at first supported Hyder but changed sides when he heard that the Marathas were planning an attack on him, and joined up with the British instead. It was in the First Mysore War that Tippu, at the age of seventeen, first showed his mettle. He was in charge of a regiment assigned to him by his father, Hyder Ali. Within a month of the start of hostilities, Tippu's forces rode up to the very gates of Madras. On September 28, 1767, the British Governor Bouchier, the Board of Governors of the Company, as well as Muhammed Ali, the Nawab of Arcot, were in the Madras gardens when Tippu's cavalry came charging up. Tippu would have arrested them all were it not for a small boat that happened to be in the waters off the gardens and provided them a narrow escape. The Mysore armies were victorious on all fronts, in the east near Madras, and in the west along the coast of Malabar. The war ended when Hyder Ali mounted a second assault on Madras in March 1768 and dictated peace terms to the Madras Governor. The Treaty of Madras (1769) called for a return of captured territories by both sides, and each side promised to help the other in the event of an attack from a third party.

The peace treaty was tested when the Marathas invaded Mysore the following year and the British, untrue to their covenant, refused to help Hyder Ali. The breach of faith left an enduring legacy of distrust of the British in the young Tippu. The Maratha armies raided all the way to Srirangapatam, but withdrew when the stout resistance of Tippu frustrated their assault. The next eight years were of intermittent warfare between Mysore with the Marathas and the Nizam. The victorious team of father and son (Hyder Ali and Tippu) extended the frontiers of Mysore to the shores of the Krishna River, pushing back both the Marathas and the Nizam. It was during this period, in 1773, that Tippu married Ruqayya Banu, daughter of an army general. Ruqayya Banu became the future queen of Mysore and was the mother of Tippu's sons.

Global events overtook the military contests in India. In 1776, the American colonies declared their independence from England. War erupted, George Washington took command of the American troops and British resources were stretched to the limit. In one of these battles, a loyalist force under General Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington at Yorktown located on the Hudson River in modern New York state(1781). Cornwallis retired to England, where the East India Company hired him. It was

Cornwallis who orchestrated a determined political and military campaign in the Third Mysore War (1789-1792) to contain Tippu Sultan. The French sided with the Americans in the War of Independence. In retaliation, England declared war on France, and seized the French colonies of Pondicherry (on the Bay of Bengal) and Mahe (on the Arabian Sea) in India. The seizure of Mahe on the Malabar Coast annoyed Hyder Ali since it was a primary conduit for the Mysore spice trade with West Asia and Europe.

At about the same time, the Marathas were upset with the British over their intervention in court affairs at Poona over succession issues. The Nizam, that perennial weathercock in Indian politics at that time, also viewed the British with disfavor because they had captured Guntur and given it to their satrap, Muhammed Ali of Arcot.

The confluence of these events resulted in an unusual alignment of Indian forces against the British. By now, the Indian potentates were alert to the machinations of the East India Company. They had seen how the British had brought the Bengal economy to its knees after the Battle of Plassey (1757), imposing unbearable taxes on local products while flooding the market with cheap British goods. They were alarmed at the British victory at Buxor (1764) over the combined forces of Bengal, Oudh and the Moghul Emperor, Shah Alam. They had also witnessed how the British had starved the Begums of Oudh to surrender their state jewels (1765). A blueprint for British domination over India was apparent. In 1780, an understanding was reached between Hyder Ali of Mysore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the Marathas, to "liberate" India from the British. The French, always on the lookout for another opportunity to get into Indian politics, warmly welcomed this treaty. The combined forces of Mysore and Hyderabad were to attack Madras while the Maratha forces would challenge the British in Bombay and Bengal.

The Mysore forces were the first in battle. The causes for war were provided by the refusal of the British to hand over border territories as agreed to in the Treaty of Madras and by their march over Mysore territories in their attack on French Mahe. In July 1780, Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan marched into Madras at the head of a host of 80,000 seasoned troops. Opposing them was General Munroe, who had earned his fame as the Commander of British forces that had defeated the combined armies of Bengal, Oudh and the Moghuls at the Battle of Buxor (1764). To support Munroe, a British brigade was marching up from the south under Colonel Bailey. Tippu caught up with Bailey in September 1780, and at the Battle of Pollipur, utterly demolished it. Colonel Bailey, along with 3,820 British officers and troops, was captured. It was the worst defeat the British suffered on Indian soil. And it was this engagement that made a legend out of Tippu Sultan. Meanwhile, the main Mysore army under Hyder Ali, bested General Munroe, forcing him to abandon his guns and beat a hasty retreat into Fort St. George in Madras.

The Battle of Pollipur demolished the reputation that the British in India were invincible, as was assumed since the Battle of Buxor. It showed that a disciplined Indian army was more than a match for the Europeans. It also demonstrated that the weapons of war of the Mysore Army were in no way inferior to those of the British. The Mysore Army, 88,000 strong, was organized into regular and irregular troops. A well-trained cavalry corps of 10,000 provided the mobile arm. There were 48,000 regular infantry and 30,000 irregular infantry troops. The regular army was organized into *cushoons* (divisions), *risalas* (regiments) and *jukhs* (companies). Each soldier was supplied with a scepter, a dagger, a musket, and rounds of ammunition. The field guns were of Indian design, cast in brass, and had a longer range than those of the British. This was made possible by the large foundries located near Srirangapatam, as well as precision boring of long barrels achieved with water operated boring mills. In addition, the army had a rocket corps. The Mysore rockets had a deadly range of 1,000 yards, and carried a cartridge filled with gunpowder. It is commonly assumed that by 1799, when Napoleon

invaded Egypt, European arms were far superior to those of the armies of Asia. While it is true that the momentum was in favor of Europe thanks to the Industrial Revolution, the technological superiority of Europe over Asia in armaments for land forces was not fully established until after the fall of Mysore.

This credible military force was supported by the financial stability and economic prosperity of the kingdom. Control of the western coastline provided Tippu Sultan with access to the commercial centers of the Indian Ocean and to India. Exports included spices, sandalwood, ivory, iron, cloth, silk, brassware, woodwork, and diamonds. Imports included muskets, guns, wool and saltpeter. The balance of trade was almost always in favor of Mysore, so that accounts were current despite the heavy expenditures of war. Food was plentiful. Srirangapatam, Channapatna, Bangalore, and Bidnur were major manufacturing centers while the ports of Mangalore and Cochin were among the busiest in the Indian Ocean.

The Treaty of 1780 between Mysore, Hyderabad and the Marathas, marked a high point in the cooperation between Indian states. It was the closest that the British came to losing their hold on India before the Great Sepoy Uprising of 1857. The Treaty fell apart because India was in an advanced stage of political and social disintegration. None of the princes, except Tippu, had a global vision. And none, except Tippu, could foresee that the British presence was the beginning of a global European thrust that would swallow up India and Asia. The princes were more concerned with petty issues relating to minor adjustments of their borders, or of succession and pensions, than with the fate of India. Self-interest and intrigue, opportunism and ambition, not ethics, had become the guiding principle of politics. Ethical and spiritual decay had penetrated so deep into Indian politics that princes and generals alike were willing to sell their country for a pittance.

The ancient civilization of India, Hindu and Muslim alike, which had witnessed cycles of glory and decay, was at low ebb. Religious faith was no longer a sufficient binding force, and modern values such as nationalism were unknown. India was up against an expansionist Europe, whose social landscape was being transformed by nascent ideas, new technologies and efficient institutions. The British, with their global reach, had access to far greater resources than any Indian prince could muster. With their efficient intelligence apparatus, they were aware of the intrigues in the Indian courts, and took full advantage of it. The first to abandon the Treaty of 1780 was the Nizam. A mere promise from the British Governor General Warren Hastings that he would not swallow up the district of Guntur was sufficient to change the mind of the Nizam, and he switched sides. Not a single soldier left the city of Hyderabad to participate in the war. The Marathas were the next to quit the alliance when the British promised not to interfere in their internal affairs and to provide military assistance in recovering border territories from Mysore.

Undaunted, the Mysore armies fought, holding the British armies to a draw, in the eastern theater near Madras and in the western theater on the coast of Malabar. In the midst of the Second Mysore War, as the conflict of 1778-1782 is known, Hyder Ali died of cancer (December 1782), and Tippu succeeded him at the age of thirty two. Meanwhile, in far-away America, the War of Independence (1776-1783) ended with a triumph for the colonies. The French had joined the Americans (1778) against the British. In 1783, the French, with their support no longer needed by the Americans, concluded the Peace Treaty of Versailles with the British. Under the terms of this treaty, French and British forces were to disengage throughout the world. Accordingly, the French withdrew their support of Tippu Sultan. Tippu was at the time besieging the British at the port of Mangalore. With the Nizam and the Marathas in the British camp, and the fickle-minded French on the sidelines, Tippu saw that it was advantageous to conclude the war, even though the military advantage was with him. The Madras Treaty, negotiated through Tippu's ambassadors Appaji Ram and Srinivasa Rao, was signed on March 11, 1784. It stipulated a

mutual withdrawal of forces, and an understanding not to aid each other's enemies. The British gained the evacuation of territories on the east coast, which were nominally under their satrap Nawab Muhammed Ali of Arcot, while Mysore gained by frustrating Maratha designs on its northern territories. More importantly, Tippu demonstrated that the British were vulnerable and their position in India was not as secure as had been assumed after the fall of Bengal (1757).

The intrigues of the Indian courts provided the British plenty of opportunity to further their designs on Mysore. Not only were the Indian states quarrelling with one another, the Marathas, the principal power in central India, were divided among themselves. The vast Maratha territories were divided up between competing chiefs, Sindhia in the north, Holkar in the south, Bhosle, Gaekwad and Nana Farnawis in central India. To unseat Tippu, the British started secret correspondence with the Rani of Mysore, who had never given up her claim to her husband's throne. They also incited the Nayars of Travancore to rebel against Tippu's authority.

On a broader front, Mysore relations with the Nizam and the Marathas were always tense because neither the Nizam nor the Marathas recognized the independence of Tippu Sultan, and both claimed the territory of Mysore as their tributary. Between 1784 and 1787, Tippu waged a series of defensive operations against both of these Indian powers, which resulted in the addition of all the territories up to the Krishna River to his dominion. To counter Mysore, the Nizam and the Marathas sought a mutual alliance. When that floundered over conflicting territorial claims, they turned to the European powers for help.

As early as 1785, the Maratha court in Poona made overtures to the Bombay government for a military alliance, but was rebuffed because the British were not ready to take on Tippu as yet. The Marathas then made overtures to the French and the Portuguese but this was of no consequence. The British, licking their wounds from the loss of the American colonies, were reluctant, at this time, to get involved in hostilities on behalf of the Indian princes. In addition, they were reluctant to break the Treaty of Versailles and provide a pretext for the French to get back into the Indian game.

The situation changed with the arrival of Cornwallis in 1785 as Governor General of the East India Company. The loss of the American colonies had freed British manpower and material resources. These resources were now focused on India and on the Indian Ocean. Cornwallis had made a name for himself in the war against the Americans in their War of Independence, although his surrender to George Washington on October 19, 1781 at Yorktown had tarnished that image. As soon as he arrived in India, Cornwallis started preparations for a final confrontation with Tippu Sultan. Methodically, he proceeded to build a military-political alliance to surround and destroy the Kingdom of Mysore.

It was during this period (1786-1787) that Tippu Sultan sent embassies to the Turkish Sultan in Istanbul, Louis XVI of France, the Shah of Persia, the Sultan of Oman, and Zaman Shah of Afghanistan. With a singular passion for expelling the British from India, he tried diplomacy and sought alliances throughout the Islamic world and the Indian subcontinent. Through his ambassador to France, Tippu sought a military alliance as well as help with artisans and military engineers. The reply of Louis XVI was polite but evasive. A similar overture to the Dutch for a defensive alliance in 1788 was rejected. In his representations to the Turkish Sultan, he pleaded for military help against the British and sought the title of Padashah. Muslims around the globe looked upon the Sultan as the Caliph of Islam and its guardian. Only he could bestow legitimacy on the sultans and emirs of Asia and Africa. Tippu was successful in earning the title of Padashah from Istanbul but there was no military help. The reasons for this lay in the European politics of the time. The French Revolution (1789) was soon to engulf France, challenging the authority of kings and despots and most of the European monarchs were about to lose their thrones. The Turkish Sultan, not unaware of these changes and as insurance for his own survival,

was careful to cultivate the British as a bulwark against the French. In addition, the Russians were aggressive on the northern Ottoman borders, and the Porte in Istanbul was in no position to help an Indian Padashah in his struggle against the British in far-away India.

Tippu's relations with Persia were cordial. In 1781, during the Second Mysore War, his father Hyder Ali had asked for help from the shah and had received a contingent of 1,000 troops. But post-Safavid Persia was a minor player on the world scene and was itself on the defensive against the Russians in Azerbaijan. Tippu scored some success with the Sultan of Oman who controlled the coastline of Arabia and East Africa with a credible navy. But after some initial success, British diplomacy successfully isolated Mysore, and concluded a Treaty of Friendship with the Sultan of Oman (1798).

The Nizam and the Marathas viewed the rising power of Mysore with jealousy and suspicion, and Cornwallis had little difficulty in forging a confederacy with them against Tippu. Hostilities began when the Raja of Travancore bought two small principalities from the Dutch. These principalities, Cranganore and Ayakotteh, had been held by another raja, the Raja of Cochin, before the arrival of the Europeans. The Portuguese occupied them in 1511, and lost them to the Dutch circa 1600. By 1780, the Dutch were a waning power in India and had their hands full at home with an incipient revolution. By the sale of these two towns, they wished to raise cash to defray the cost of fending off the French in India, but they desired to do so in such a manner that it would embroil Tippu and the British in conflict. The Raja of Cochin had become a tributary of Tippu, and Tippu desired to buy these towns for himself. When the Dutch sold them instead to the Raja of Travancore, friction increased between Mysore and Travancore. As a further provocation, the Raja built fortifications through territories nominally under the control of Mysore. Tippu moved against the Raja, who had an alliance with the British. This provided an excuse for Cornwallis to commence hostilities. Tippu Sultan's overtures to the French and the Turks for military alliances were construed by the British to be directed against them. It is also possible that Cornwallis had a personal stake in the war, to retrieve his reputation after his losses to the Americans at the Battle of Saratoga and his surrender to George Washington at Yorktown. The British feared a repeat of their North American experience in India. In America, French assistance had helped the colonies win their War of Independence (1776-1783) under General Washington. Was it not possible that the Indians would prevail if they followed the example of Tippu Sultan?

Cornwallis went about his task methodically. In March 1790, he entered into a treaty with the Marathas to attack Mysore from three directions: the Bombay army from the sea, the Marathas from the north, and the Madras army from the east. Not all the Maratha chiefs were sanguine about British aims, but the hawks in Poona prevailed. In July of the same year, the Nizam entered into a similar treaty with the Company. His goal was to recover territories he had lost to Mysore in previous wars. To complete the encirclement of Tippu, the British incited the Nayars of Malabar, the Bibi of Cannanore and the Raja of Cochin. Tippu initiated a diplomatic counter offensive of his own to convince the Marathas and the Nizam to support him or remain neutral. In this game of diplomacy, the British carried the day, and a four-pronged attack against Mysore began in 1791.

The British fielded more than 25,000 troops, including 600 British officers. The Nizam provided 20,000 troops, while the Maratha armies numbered about the same. A supply chain of over 42,000 bullocks and several hundred elephants backed these armies. Cornwallis moved to Madras from Calcutta and personally took command of the operations. The initial military advantage lay with Tippu Sultan. The sustained onslaught from the three enemies took its toll, however, and the Mysoreans reluctantly yielded territory.

The war lasted a full two years. The Fort of Bangalore fell in 1791 after a desperate resistance. Throughout the war, Tippu Sultan tried to make a separate peace with the Marathas and the Nizam. To the Marathas he offered gifts. To the Nizam he appealed in the name of God and the Prophet. But the Marathas were embroiled in their own internal politics. Although they were lukewarm in attacking Mysore, they could not extricate themselves from the alliance. Some Maratha chiefs, like Sindhia, considered a prolonged Anglo-Mysore conflict as a means to furthering their own ambitions to conquer Rajasthan and the Punjab. As for the Nizam, nothing mattered except his own immediate self-interest. The overtures did not succeed. Similar overtures to the French bore no fruit because the French had their hands full with their Revolution (1789). They offered plenty of advice but no military help.

From Bangalore, the confederate armies proceeded south, and overcoming stiff resistance from the defenders, lay siege to Srirangapatam. With his military options exhausted, Tippu sought terms of peace. The British, too, were exhausted and their treasury in India was empty. Besides, British troops were needed at home to meet the growing challenge from revolutionary France. The parties signed the Treaty of Srirangapatam in 1793, by which Tippu Sultan was forced to give up half his kingdom and agreed to pay 30 million rupees to the confederates. Until the amount was paid, he was obliged to give two of his children, Abdul Khaliq and Moezuddin, as hostages to the British. The taking of children as hostages in war was an act of banditry, not of chivalry, and it was not known in India. But then, the East India Company was there to make money, and not necessarily to practice a soldier's code of ethics!

The Third War of Mysore contained the military power of Mysore. The British won this war through their superior intelligence apparatus and diplomacy. They were more successful than the Mysoreans in exploiting the internal politics of the Indian courts to their advantage. Cornwallis also proved to be a match for the Sultan in sheer tenacity, and refused to give up even when his army was almost crippled by disease, pestilence and the monsoons. After the war, Tippu reorganized his kingdom, introduced administrative and military reforms, paid back the hostage money within a year, and by 1795 the kingdom was well on its way to recovery.

But the British feared even a Tippu Sultan reduced in strength. Cornwallis tried to renew the confederacy of 1791 with the Nizam and the Marathas, but was unsuccessful because these two Indian states were at each other's throats, fighting a bloody war over territory in Kardla (1795) in which the Marathas were victorious and the Nizam was thoroughly humiliated. Realizing his vulnerability to the Marathas on the western front, the Nizam threw himself back into the arms of the British.

The eruption of the French Revolution provided a fresh opportunity for Tippu Sultan and set the stage for a final showdown with the British. The American Revolution had provided a model for the overthrow of the monarchies in India. The powerful writings of French philosophers like Voltaire had paved the way for a changed intellectual paradigm. In July 1789, a French peasant mob stormed the Bastille, freeing the political prisoners. Their leaders declared the sanctity of the political rights of man and demanded the abolishment of oppressive feudalism. In October of the same year, a Paris mob took over the royal palace, and forced Louis XVI to adopt their revolutionary manifesto. Special privileges of the feudal lords were abolished, universal male suffrage introduced, representative government established, public education encouraged, and promotion by talent and merit instituted in place of influence and birth. The Revolution turned bloody when it sought to regulate the Church. In the ensuing turmoil, Louis XVI and the French nobility went to the guillotine. What had started as a revolution based on Voltaire's rational thought had turned into a bloody dictatorship by 1792. As the Revolution spread across Europe, France was militarized with a million Frenchmen under arms. England declared war on France (1793), and a dashing artillery captain named Napoleon Bonaparte rose to become the commander of the revolutionary forces and, ultimately, the head of the French state.

Tippu Sultan was aware of these revolutionary changes sweeping Europe. The cry of “liberty, equality, fraternity” was in consonance with his own existential vision for India. Among all the rulers of 18<sup>th</sup> century India, only Tippu could see the *possibility* of a free India, without the domination of Europe. And towards this possibility, he directed his energies, and in the final stage, gave his life for it. On a different plane, he saw the threat to Islamic civilization from European domination and sought to alert the Turks in Istanbul, the Arabs in Oman and the Afghans in Kabul to this danger. It was this vision, backed by a single-minded determination to achieve it, more than the inherent capability of a small state like Mysore that made the British fear him.

The French Revolution considered it a global mission to liberate the world from the oppression of despots. The monarchies of Western Europe fell one after the other, even as the consolidation of the revolution turned it into a dictatorship. In 1798, after overrunning all of Western Europe (except England), Napoleon landed in Egypt, and easily defeated the Turkish garrisons there. His global plan was to march from Egypt to Syria and from there to Iraq, sail from Basra to the west coast of India and evict the British from the Indian Ocean. Aware of these galactic changes, Tippu Sultan sent an ambassador to Napoleon in 1798, with a proposal for a joint attack on the British in India. The grand plan was for Napoleon to land on the Malabar coast, and after evicting the British from Madras, advance upon Bombay, and proceed from there to Bengal. Thus Tippu’s vision embraced not just Mysore, but the entire Indian subcontinent, and the Islamic world beyond.

Tippu also sent a similar proposal to the Ottomans in Istanbul and to Zaman Shah in Kabul. The Turkish sultan, himself under pressure from Napoleon’s armies, rejected Tippu’s request, and instead advised him to cooperate with the British against the French. Zaman Shah responded positively and moved with a large force from Kabul taking Lahore in 1798 on his way to Delhi. But British diplomacy fanned Shi’a-Sunni disturbances between Persia and Afghanistan, Persian forces moved towards Qandahar and Zaman Shah had to withdraw from Hindustan to tend to matters at home.

Napoleon, impressed with the reputation and determination of Tippu Sultan, wrote to him in 1799:

“From Bonaparte, Member of the National Convention, Commanding General, to the Most Magnificent Sultan, our greatest friend, Tippu Saheb: You have already been informed of my arrival on the Red Sea, with a large and invincible Army, full of a desire to deliver you from the yoke of England. . . . I request you to inform me by way of Muscat and Mocha as to your political situation . . . I would further wish you could send some intelligent person to Suez or Cairo, someone in your confidence, with whom I may confer . . . May the Almighty increase your power and destroy your enemies”.

The letter was to be delivered to Tippu through the Sheriff of Mecca, but was intercepted by agents of the British in Aden and never reached Mysore. Meanwhile, Napoleon was defeated by Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar (1799), and the Ottomans stopped the French in Syria. Napoleon withdrew to France. Mysore became a casualty of the Napoleonic Wars. Convinced that Tippu would never give up his dream to rid India of the British, they resolved to eliminate him. The aggressive new Governor General Wellesley needed no fresh provocation to renew hostilities. A new alliance was struck with the Nizam, who was always ready to grab at any straw thrown at him by the British. But the Marathas, alarmed at the growing power of the Company, refused to join this time. More importantly, the Company’s agents “bought off” most of the senior officers of Tippu Sultan. The finance minister Mir Saadiq was a principal turncoat. Others who were under varying degrees of British influence were the divan Poornayya and the army commanders Qamruddin and Sayyid.

The Third Mysore War had greatly reduced the boundaries of Mysore and provided more convenient jumping off points for an invasion. Treason at the highest level denied the Sultan accurate information about enemy troops. In March 1799, a force of 20,000 Company troops, and an equal number from the Nizam, backed by a host of support and supply troops invaded the land of Tippu Sultan and quickly overran the Fort of Bangalore. Resistance from the Mysore infantry was stiff, but by April 4, 1799, the invaders reached the capital of Srirangapatam and laid siege to it.

It was a hot summer day on May 4, 1799, a day of infamy in the history of India and of shame in the history of the Muslims. The sun beat down mercilessly on the Deccan Plateau. Heat waves rose from the baked soil, creating ghost like mirages in the air. There was an eerie silence in the Fort of Srirangapatam, the capital of Mysore. The birds had retired into their nests to escape the heat. Even the beasts in the surrounding forests had withdrawn from the mayhem of war. Tippu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, had just returned from inspecting his troops, and was sitting down to his midday meal with his infant son.

Suddenly, there was an uproar from the western side of the fort. Volleys of gunfire could be heard, mingled with shouts of a thousand men in mortal combat. A soldier rushed to the Sultan, offered a military salute, and informed him that the British forces had breached the western wall and had invaded the island capital. The Sultan rose up, put on his *kamarband* and regal turban, mounted his Arabian horse, and rode into battle with his bodyguard. Dust rose from the hooves of the horses as the soldiers disappeared into the far distance and joined the battle lines.

The Sultan mounted a rampart and surveyed the field. The waters of the Cauvery River, which flowed around Srirangapatam, creating a natural moat around the fort, were low from the summer heat. To the west were 6,000 British soldiers of the Madras Army under General Harris supported by an equal number of hired Indian Sepoys. To the north were an additional 2,000 British soldiers under General Stuart from the Bombay Army and hundreds of Indian support troops. Farther out were more than 20,000 troops from the Nizam of Hyderabad, who had joined the British, despite the call of patriotism and faith. Supporting these large armies were more than 40,000 bullocks, which served as beasts of burden, hauling supply carts for the invaders.

Harris had advanced upon Srirangapatam on April 4. The march was the opening act of an historical drama, which was to change the history of India and of the British Empire. Wellesley, Governor General of the British East India Company, had instructed Harris to accept nothing less than surrender from Tippu. On April 20, Harris submitted these terms to the Sultan:

1. Surrender to the East India Company the entire Malabar Coast in western India.
2. Surrender more than half of Mysore territories to the British.
3. Pay 20 million rupees as war indemnity. (In 1799 a Mysore rupee had the purchasing power of more than 6,000 Indian rupees today).
4. Expel all Frenchmen from the kingdom (The French had arrived to help Mysore against the British).
5. Surrender four of Tippu's sons as ransom until the indemnity was paid.
6. Accept a British Resident in Srirangapatam. (The last stipulation, if accepted, would have made Tippu Sultan a satrap of the British Crown).

These humiliating terms were totally unacceptable to the Sultan who is often quoted as saying, "To live like a tiger for one day is preferable to living a hundred years as a jackal". The terms were rejected and Tippu decided to defend the liberty of his people to his last breath.

A noble vision requires noble men to achieve it. This was not to be. The ethical rot that had consumed Bengal in 1757 was now gnawing at Mysore. Muslim civilization was in an advanced stage of decay. It now produced traitors and sycophants in abundance, and very few *mujahids* and *ghazis*. Neither was the rot confined to the Muslims. Indian society, always at the brink of fragmentation, had lost the cohesion to resist a foreign invader. Traitors, Muslims and Hindus alike, men who had sold themselves to the enemy for a petty jagir (land grant) or a paltry pension, surrounded Tippu. Critical information was withheld from the Sultan. The three principal Mysore commanders operating to the rear of the British forces, Qamruddin, Poornayya, and Sayyid, were all in collusion with the British. On April 6, Major General Floyd, second in command to General Harris of the Madras Army, had marched from the east, along the Cauvery River, to link up with the Bombay Army under General Stuart advancing from the west. Qamruddin, in command of the Mysore Cavalry, had galloped on Floyd's flank the entire distance but did nothing to impede the enemy. A second Mysore Army Corps under Poornayya was silent during the entire conflict. A third Corps under Sayyid was in open league with the British. Indeed, except for General Ghaffar, who commanded the southern ramparts within the Fort, all of the leading figures on the Mysore side were working with the British.

The principal figure in this infamous group was Mir Saadiq, finance minister at the Tippu court. As early as October 1798, he had written to the British agents in Madras that he was willing to place himself under their protection. During the fateful siege of 1799, he played a crucial role in the fall of Srirangapatam. By May 3, heavy and sustained bombardment from British guns had opened a breach in the western wall of the fort. That night, under pretext of inspecting the damaged fort, Mir Saadiq spent his time at the western ramparts. Curiously, at the same time, an English scout under Lt. Lalor, forded the Cauvery River and examined the same ramparts. Historians of the Mysore conflict have inferred that the two met at this breach and agreed that the British should assault the Fort on the afternoon of May 4<sup>th</sup>.

At 1 pm on May 4<sup>th</sup>, Mir Saadiq, the finance minister, directed Mir Nadim, the *Qiladar* (captain of the fort), to arrange for salary payments to the troops defending the fort. The troops were withdrawn from the western sector. At 1:30 pm, Mir Saadiq ascended the ramparts near the breach and waved a white handkerchief, signaling the British that a general assault could begin. Mysore historians are unanimous that Mir Saadiq was a traitor to his sultan and played a crucial, perhaps a decisive, role in the fall of Srirangapatam.

The Sultan threw himself into the thick of battle, calling on the Mysore defenders to hold their ground. The Mysore flag with the blazing sun at its center, and tiger stripes radiating out, shone with added pride that summer afternoon. The British had already broken through the lightly defended outer ramparts, from where Mysore troops had been withdrawn at the instigation of Mir Saadiq. From there, in an enveloping movement, the British had advanced along the northern and southern rims of the fort. The appearance of the Sultan held the lines along the northern rim. In the fray, the Sultan himself received three bayonet wounds. But the enemy threw additional troops into the battle. Altogether, 4,376 British and several thousand Indian troops were involved in the assault. The southern battlements, commanded by Sayyid who was in league with the British, offered little resistance, and the southern assault succeeded in breaking through to the palace, located towards the center of the island. The Sultan was now hemmed in. Undaunted, he led his stead forward. Loyal troops charged, cutting down the invading forces. An enemy bullet pierced the Sultan's stomach. He fought on, like a wounded tiger, surrounded by mortal enemies. Another round hit his shoulder, and the force of the round knocked him off his horse, and his turban fell. The wounded prince stood his ground on foot, his sword glistening in the afternoon sun, surrounded on all sides by red coats. The afternoon wore on, even as the lonely Sultan

held off one charge after another. It is said among the Muslims of Mysore that the angels themselves stopped to marvel at this prince of valor. At last, the brave soldier fell, exhausted by thirst, enfeebled by blood loss from his wounds.

The sun was now about to set not just on the Fort of Srirangapatam but on India itself. As the Sultan lay semi-conscious, a British soldier reached for Tippu's diamond-studded *kamarband*, hoping to claim it as his war booty. But the Tiger was only wounded; he was not dead. Out came the Sultan's sword and in one swoop he inflicted a gashing wound on the intruder's arm. Enraged, the soldier shot the Sultan in the temple and his soul departed to join up with those who had inherited the legacy of Hussain, grandson of the Prophet and the martyr of Karbala.

An epoch ended in the history of the Islamic people, and a new epoch began. The sun set on the age of soldier-kings. With him disappeared "the pride of India and the shield of the Caliphate". Alone among the princes of India, Tippu had valiantly defended his independence against the encroachments of a foreign power. From a global Muslim perspective, he was the only soldier-king in modern times, who stood his ground and lay down his life defending his realm against an aggressive and expansionist Europe. The age of merchants was about to dawn, in which the trader-barons of England would be the kingmakers of Asia.

It was dark when a search party of the victorious British found the body of the Sultan. When General Harris heard of the death of Tippu, he is said to have exclaimed: "Today, India is ours!" When news spread that the Sultan had fallen, a loot of Srirangapatam began. The British fell upon the defenseless inhabitants of the capital. Throughout the night of May 5th, they indulged in an orgy of slaughter, looting and fire, which continued well into the following day. Every single house in the island city was plundered. Turbans, daggers, jewelry, furniture, anything of value-and sometimes of no value-was taken. The Sultan's palace was ransacked, and everything in it was looted, down to the linen on Tippu's bed. The throne of Mysore was broken up and melted down for its gold. The famous *huma* bird, studded with diamonds and rubies that had adorned the throne was claimed by one of the colonels. The total amount of loot that day exceeded 2 million English pounds, which was more than twice what was extracted by the British from the Begums of Oudh in 1764. This amount would be equal to 2 billion US dollars at today's market prices. Untold amounts of jewels were stolen. The booty was divided up among the troops, with the British officers often shamelessly disagreeing among themselves about their portion of the loot. As time went on, the remnants of the Sultan's treasures were dispersed. There is hardly an old army barrack in the British Isles today that does not boast a piece of booty from Tippu's capital. Items that were unusual, or priceless (such as the diamond and ruby studded *huma* bird), made their way to the royal museums.

The Nizam, left out of the spoils of war, asked for his portion. The British denied the request saying that it was *their* soldiers who had conducted the final assault. On second thought, General Harris noticed that the tigers in Tippu's zoo had not been fed for three days because of the pressures of war. They were restless and hungry. Harris offered the hungry tigers to the Nizam's general, an offer that was politely declined.

It was not until the afternoon of the fifth of May 1799 that the looting stopped. The British Code of Arms called for a proper burial for a noble foe. The Sultan's body was mounted on a carriage, drawn by sixteen horses, and was carried to the Gumbaz, where his father lay buried. Leading the procession were British troops from the same regiments that had stormed the Fort. Prayers were said, and British guns saluted the vanquished foe, as Tippu's body was laid to rest. Alone among the many princes, padashas,

nawabs, rajas and potentates that the British vanquished in their relentless expansion around the globe, Tippu Sultan had won their respect as a worthy foe. To this day, British historians refer to this prince of soldiers as “Tippu Saib”, honoring a Sultan who held the British Empire at bay for forty years.

Those who had betrayed the Sultan received their due reward from the Company. Qamruddin and Poornayya hurried back to the capital upon hearing the news of Tippu’s death. Qamruddin was given a *jagir*, and no doubt had plenty of time to ruminate on the aftermath of his betrayal. Poornayya became the divan (prime minister) for the infant Raja who was installed on the throne of Mysore by the British. Sayyid fell on the day of the battle in the mayhem of war. As for Mir Saadiq, he was dragged down from his horse as he rode away after tipping off the British and was slain by a Mysore soldier. For generations, the Muslims of Mysore have invoked the curse of God upon his grave.

Tippu had, with singular determination, resisted the advance of the British. His death, and the fall of Srirangapatam removed the last hurdle from British ambitions to control the vast subcontinent of India and Pakistan. With Tippu’s last breath, Muslim power in the subcontinent also breathed its last. The kingdom of Mysore was divided up. The rich spice-trading coastline of Malabar was absorbed into the Bombay dominions. The Nizam received the districts of Cuddapah and Kurnool. A truncated and landlocked Mysore was left for the Rajas, and a British Resident installed to oversee the affairs of the princely state. Tippu’s sons were expelled to Calcutta, where they received a pension for a while, but gradually melted into the poverty stricken milieu of Bengal. The only remaining armed power on Indian soil, the Marathas, could not withstand British pressure for long, and succumbed four year later in 1803. By 1806, the British Army was in Red Fort in Delhi. With the vast resources of the subcontinent at their command, the British embarked on building their empire, on which it was said at one time, the sun never set.

Comments are closed.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](http://Blog.atWordPress.com)