

# The Battle of Plassey: The Beginning of Political Hegemony

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**ABSTRACT:** The famous battle, during which the 39th Foot (later the Dorset Regiment) played such a prominent part, was fought on the 23rd June 1757 and effectively marked the start of 200 years' British rule in India. Universally referred to as Plassey, after the village near which the action happened, the battlefield is found north of Calcutta within the region referred to as Bengal and is now near the north-eastern border of India with Bangladesh. As has been the case in many other instances, the action was a relatively straightforward matter compared to the politics, rivalry, greed, treachery, bribery, 'spin' and general skulduggery which led up thereto.

**KEYWORDS:** PLASSEY, WAR, POLITICAL HEGEMONY, CASUALTIES, PRIMUS IN INDIAS.

## I. INTRODUCTION:

Historically, the British began trading with India within the early 17th Century through the British Malay Archipelago Company and have become more and more influential, effectively ruling many districts. Although the corporate used mostly locally-enlisted troops (sepoys) that they had small detachments of the British Army 'under command.' Any sort of British rule was obviously unpopular with some local rulers, including the Nawab of Bengal, Surajah Dowlah, who in 1756 captured a British fort in Calcutta and imprisoned 146 members of the garrison during a tiny building. Many of the captives died of warmth exhaustion in what became referred to as the region of Calcutta<sup>2</sup>. In February 1757 the Nawab agreed to sign a peace with the British, but at about an equivalent time news filtered through to India of the war which had broken out between Britain and France the previous year. Light Colonel Robert (later Lord) Clive, who was commanding British forces in Bengal, foresaw that the French and therefore the Nawab might unite forces against them, so he decided to require the initiative and test the Nawab's intentions. He, therefore, asked him for permission to attack Chandernagore where there was a French

settlement. Despite the Treaty, the Nawab refused permission, but Clive still marched on the town and captured it on the 23rd March. Clive and his masters within the Malay Archipelago Company decided that they might not trust the Nawab, whose army was assembled at Plassey and was, therefore, a threat to Calcutta. Anxious that there should be no repetition of the region incident, they decided to depose the Nawab and replace him with Mir Jafar, Commander-in-Chief of the Nawab's army. William Watts, who spoke the local dialect, was sent secretly to barter with Mir Jafar<sup>3</sup> who, alongside other nobles, offered his support to the British. It had been at this moment that a messenger arrived from Calcutta with a letter purporting to return from the chieftain of Berar, containing a suggestion to bring 120,000 men into Bengal to cooperate with British against the Nawab. Clive initially thought this could be a trick by the Nawab to seek out true feelings of the British towards him. So he sent the letter to the Nawab as an outward mark of his confidence in him, and at an equivalent time asked him to get rid of his army from Plassey. This Surajah did, bringing it back to Murshidabad, the capital, twenty-two miles further north, far away from Calcutta. Thinking British were now on his side he began threatening his nobles where before he had been scared of them. His first intended victim was Mir Jafar, who shut himself up in his palace and defied his master, at an equivalent time sending word to British begging them to start operations directly. The agreement between British and Mir Jafar, by which the latter was to this spelling, is an anglicized version of the local name Palashi, from the Palash tree, which won't to team in the vicinity. The Palash tree is understood because of the Flame of the Forest due to its bright red flowers. Past rulers of Bengal played Changan (a version of hockey) in the dark using burning balls made up of the wood of this tree because it had been light and burned for an extended time. <sup>2</sup> The region of Calcutta incident undoubtedly happened, but it seems likely that there was a degree of exaggeration in subsequent colonial

literature so as to form the Indians appears less civilized than Europeans. The first story was that 146 prisoners were kept overnight in a room measuring 18 by 15 feet which only 23 survived. the precise details are disputed by historians ever since. 3 The story goes that Watts, dressed as an area veiled lady, met Mir Jafar in Jaffarganj, a village near Murshidabad. The gate through which Watts is meant to possess entered the village remains called Nemaq Haramer Deori (Traitor's Gate). Watts was later rewarded with a present of £114,000 for his efforts. 2 Soldier 39th of Foot - 1757 be placed on the throne of the Nawab reciprocally for co-operation within the field had by now been signed, and there was no point in delaying.

### PRELIMINARY MOVES

On the 13th June 1757 Clive left Chandernagore for Murshidabad, and therefore the following day he sent a letter to the Nawab which amounted to a declaration of war. Surajah, thoroughly scared, now tried to placate Mir Jafar and therefore the other nobles. all of them swore allegiance to him, and again he became filled with confidence, little realizing that they were still united with the British. His army was another time-ordered forward to an entrenched camp at Plassey. By the 21st of June, the force was in position. Clive, advancing from Chandernagore, had reached Palti, a town on the western bank of the River Bhagirathi, on the 16th. the subsequent day he sent a force composed of 200 Europeans and 500 sepoys with one field artillery and one small howitzer, all under the command of Major Eyre Coote of the 39th Foot, against Katwa, a town, and fort about twelve miles away. Katwa surrendered after a really short resistance and therefore the same evening Clive arrived with the remainder of the force. An immense supply of grain was captured also as a substantial quantity of stores. Subsequent day the season broke with great violence, but luckily the troops were undercover within the huts and houses of the town. Only a couple of miles and therefore the River Bhagirathi now lay between Clive and therefore the Nawab's forces, but things were uncertain because a letter dated the 16th was received from Mir Jafar announcing his reconciliation with the Nawab but also, strangely, his intention of completing his agreement with British. This was followed, on the 20th, by another letter from an equivalent source, merely saying that he was on the purpose of the beginning, that he was to be posted on one flank of the military, and would send further information later. There was no specific suggestion of co-

operation between him and therefore the British. Clive was undecided on what he should neutralize in view of the uncertainty of Mir Jafar's attitude. Dare he, with a military consisting of three,000 men of whom only about one-third were Europeans, cross the river and attack a force of fifty,000, counting on the uncertain promises of the commander of but one-third of that force that he would join him during the action? There appeared to be three alternatives: he could fortify himself at Katwa and await the rains to end; he could return to Calcutta, or he could attack. Clive called a Council of War on the 21st to assist him to decide.

### CLIVE'S COUNCIL OF WAR

Twenty officers, all those above the rank of the subaltern, attended the Council. Among them were two majors: Grant and Eyre Coote, two of the 39th Foot. Clive explained the choices and initially recommended that they ought to fortify Katwa until the season was over. He then involved votes so as of seniority. Major Eyre Coote was the fourth to record his opinion and was the primary to declare for immediate action, explaining that thus far British had met with nothing but success, which had naturally raised the spirits of the force, and he feared any delay could be bad for morale. Furthermore, he suggested that communication with Calcutta would be stopped due to the good distance, and thus there might be no doubt of getting resupplies and this is able to mean privation and distress for the force throughout the season. The opinion was against him to the extent of thirteen votes against seven, but Clive was 3 impressed<sup>4</sup>. Dismissing the Council, he strolled to a clump of trees, and sitting down again, considered all the arguments. A bold man himself, he saw the logic of Eyre Coote's reasoning, and at the top of an hour, he returned to his quarters determined to offer battle and dictated his Orders for the advance.

### THE OPPOSING FORCES

Deducting the sick and wounded and a little guard to be left at Katwa, the force with which he was close to march against the Nawab consisted of 750 European infantry; 200 men of mixed Portuguese and native blood, armed and equipped as Europeans; 100 European artillery; 50 British sailors and a couple of,100 native troops. The artillery consisted of eight 6-pounders and a couple of small howitzers. The Nawab's army amounted to about 18,000 cavalries, 35,000 infantry and about 53 guns, some worked by a celebration of 40-50 French, who had escaped from Chandernagore. These guns were mostly of heavy calibre - 32, 24

and 18 pounders. The infantry was generally not well trained or armed, but the cavalry was well mounted and armed with swords or long spears. The chances against Clive were thus enormous.

### THE BATTLE

At sunrise on the 22nd of June, the British crossed the Bhagirathi. There was no opposition, and by 4 pm the force was safely on the eastern bank. At sunset, Clive and his army marched the 15 miles to Plassey, following the winding bank of the river. It had been an exhausting march, as due to recent floods the water was often above waist height, while the rain was falling in torrents. It had been not until one o'clock within the morning on the 23rd that they reached their destination. Passing through the village, the exhausted troops bivouacked north of it, within the large mango grove which was about 800 yards long and 300 yards in width, surrounded by an earth bank and ditch. This was an early indication of Major Eyre Coote's talent which was to face him in good stead throughout his military career – he retired as a general officer. The nearby encampment occupied by the Nawab had in its southern face a redoubt (marked A on the Plan) during which cannon were mounted. 300 yards east of it, and ahead of the entrenchments, was a hillock covered with jungle (B) and about eight hundred yards to the south was a reservoir of water. 100 yards still further to the south was a bigger tank (C). Both these tanks were surrounded by large banks of earth. Just north of the mango grove and on the Bhagirathi was a hunting box (D) belonging to the Nawab, surrounded by a masonry wall. Clive had taken the precaution on reaching the grove of sending out a force of 200 Europeans and 300 Sepoys with two guns to carry this enclosure. Outposts were also placed all around the force. Soon after daybreak on the 23rd June, the Nawab's army was seen to be advancing in two lines towards the mango grove as if to surround it. Ahead was the party of French with four guns, and that they proceeded to require up an edge at the larger of the 2 tanks, about half a mile from the British line. Between this party and therefore the river were two heavy guns under a native officer. Immediately to the rear of the French and supporting them was a picked body of 5,000 cavalries and seven, 000 infantry, commanded by the Nawab's faithful general Mir Mudin Khan. From the left rear of this force, the remainder of the military formed a curve towards Plassey, getting to within about eight hundred yards of the south-east corner of the mango grove. Mir Jafar's forces were on the left flank. Clive drew up his troops in one

line just north of the grove together with his left resting on the hunting box. Within the centre he placed his Europeans, consisting of detachments of the 39th Foot and Bombay, Madras and Bengal European regiments, flanked on either side by three 6-pounders. On the proper and left flanks, he posted his native troops. At an equivalent time, he sent a little party with two 6-pounders and two howitzers to occupy some brick kilns about 2 hundred yards ahead of his left flank. A look at the map will show how dangerous his position was, threatened both ahead and on the proper flank. The battle opened at 6 am or shortly afterwards with an attempt from one among the French guns which killed one and wounded another man of the 39th. This appeared to be the signal for an important bombardment by all of the Nawab's guns. British guns replied but because they were of smaller calibre they made little impression. Luckily most of the enemy's shots went high, but however, after thirty minutes Clive had suffered about thirty casualties and he decided to withdraw all the force except the 2 detachments at the brick kilns and therefore the hunting box behind the bank which bordered the mango grove. What seemed to be a withdrawal encouraged the enemy, who brought their guns much nearer and maintained a good more vigorous rate of fireside? British, however, now had the advantage of excellent cover and sheltered by the bank they suffered few casualties. Clive ordered a number of the lads to chop holes within the bank for his guns to fireside through, and that they were then ready to successfully engage the opposing gunners. This stalemate continued until late morning, by which era there had been no indication that Mir Jafar had any intention of adjusting sides. Being completely outnumbered, Clive had no real offensive option, so he decided to take care of his present position until midnight then to attack the Nawab's camp, hoping for Mir Jafar's help. It had been at now, at about noon that nature intervened. A violent rainstorm sprang up and lasted for about an hour. British had tarpaulins able to cover their ammunition and suffered little or no inconvenience. The enemy wasn't also prepared and consequently, their rate of fireside initially slackened then dwindled away almost completely, as their powder was soaked. Mir Mudin, however, thinking that British would be during a similar plight, advanced towards the grove with a body of cavalry to require advantage of things. His party was received with a storm of grapeshot which drove it back, mortally wounding the leader. This proved to be the decisive moment of the battle, but Clive couldn't have anticipated that such a seemingly minor skirmish

would cause the Nawab's retreat. He re-entered the hunting box which he had made his headquarters and laid right down to rest, giving orders that he was to be roused if there was any sign of enemy activity. We must now turn for a flash to events within the Nawab's army. The death of Mir Mudin deprived the Nawab of his most faithful general. He sent for Mir Jafar and begged him to five remain loyal and to defend him. Beginning his turban, he threw it on the bottom ahead of his uncle exclaiming in humble tones: 'Jafar, that turban thou must defend.' Mir Jafar played his deceitful part admirably and promised to use every effort, meaning all the time to betray the Nawab as soon as possible. Immediately the interview was finished he galloped back to his troops and sent a letter to Clive telling him what had happened and urging him to press on directly or in any case to not delay the attack. Clive didn't get this letter in time to profit by it. The Nawab, by now thoroughly bewildered and incapable of thinking coherently, did so; mounting a camel, he rode with about 2,000 horsemen to Murshidabad. It had been now about 2 pm and therefore the enemy generals had matters in their own hands. They began falling back because the Nawab had ordered them. But the French gunners were made from sterner stuff and refused to go away their position, recognizing that if British were to manoeuvre forward and occupy the cistern they might be in a perfect position to fireside onto the flank of the Nawab's withdrawing troops. Among British officers at the battle was Major Kilpatrick, who had already distinguished himself in southern India and who was commanding the troops of the Malay Archipelago Company. Seeing the French gunners' determined stand and recognizing the importance of the position they held, he decided to attack them. He sent word to Clive and advanced with two companies and two guns. The messenger is claimed to possess found Clive asleep, but he was quickly aroused and, furious that a crucial manoeuvre was being made without his agreement, ran out and reprimanded Kilpatrick. a fast glance at things, however, convinced him of the soundness of the latter's plan which he himself would have ordered had he been on the spot. He, therefore, sent Kilpatrick back for the remainder of the force and continued to steer the advance himself. The French, seeing that their position was hopeless, withdrew to the corner of the entrenchment, and ready to bring their guns into action again. While British force was following the retreating enemy it had been seen that the troops commanded by Mir Jafar were moving more slowly than the remainder of the enemy and were starting to drag. When the rearmost files were

about level with the northern end of the grove the entire group wheeled to the left and marched therein direction. Not knowing that they were the troops of Mir Jafar, and thinking this could be a raid on his baggage, Clive despatched a celebration of Europeans with a gun to see them. the hearth soon stopped them but they made no efforts to rejoin the Nawab's army. Meanwhile, Clive had reached the tank just evacuated by the French and opened heavy artillery fire against the enemy behind the entrenchment. The bulk of the Nawab's officers and therefore the troops knew nothing about the treachery that was happening and were still faithful to Surajah Dowlah and thus, seeing that they were superior to the attacking force left the entrenchment and opened an important fire on British troops. The position was one that could become dangerous. Clive moved up closer to the entrenchment and posted half his infantry and artillery on the bank surrounding the smaller of the 2 tanks. Most of the rest were placed on rising ground to the left whereupon he opened heavy and sustained artillery and musket fire on the enemy, causing considerable casualties. Even so, with the French artillery still effective, vastly superior numbers, and many of cavalry, the enemy retained the whip hand. While these events were happening, Clive noticed that the enemy on his right, which he thought were trying to attack his baggage, had made no move and were taking no part in the battle. It dawned on him that this force must be under the command of Mir Jafar and he was relieved that there was not a danger to his rear. Despite his much smaller force, Clive decided to force an end to the battle by making a serious effort to hold the redoubt held by the French and therefore the hillock to the east of it. He, therefore, formed two strong detachments and sent them simultaneously against the 2 objectives, supporting them with the most body within the rear. Capitol Hill was taken first, without an attempt being fired, and therefore the French realized that their position was outflanked and not tenable in order that they withdrew. Effectively this marked the top of the battle and by 5 pm Clive was on top of things of the entire area. The victory of Plassey was complete. Judged purely from a military standpoint the action was little quite a skirmish, but the 6 effect of Clive's victory was to realize control over the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa for the British.

#### CASUALTIES

The precise numbers of the 39th Foot present at the battle aren't recorded, but were probably about 350 men with the subsequent

officers: Majors Archibald Grant and Eyre Coote, Lieutenant (temporary Captain) John Corneille, and Ensigns Joseph Adnett and Martin Yorke. The casualties on the British side were absurdly small. Accounts vary on the particular figures, but all put them as between 22 and 24 killed, and between 43 and 50 wounded. The losses to the Nawab's army could only be estimated, but they were considered to be about 1,000 killed and wounded. Additionally, quite 40 guns fell into the hands of the British.

## II. CONCLUSION:

within the words of The historical document of the 39th of Foot: 'The motto Primus in Indis and therefore the word Plassey, borne by Royal authority on the regimental colour of the Thirty-ninth are proud memorials of its having been the primary King's regiment which served in India and of the gallantry displayed during this war. Through this war the British East India Company spread their empire in Bengal. Here onwards the government led the people as the puppet of royal family's hand. They were having a nominal kind power but the original power occupied by the East Indian Company only.

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