

Archives of Empire

Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter Edited

New Delhi, Primus Books, 2018, [London, Duke University Durham, 2003], pp.828. Rs.1995.
ISBN 10:9386552574/ISBN 13: 9789386552570 (Hardcover)

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Agreement between the Nabob Nudjum-ul-Dowlah and the Company, 12 August, 1765

“The King having been graciously pleased to grant to the English Company the Dewanny of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, with the revenues thereof, as a free gift for ever, on certain conditions, whereof one is that there shall be a sufficient allowance out of the said revenues for.....the Nizamut.....I hope will be inviolably observed.....Bengal”

*Fort William, 30th September 1765.
Alexander Campbell, S.S.C*

This excerpt from one of the numerous original documents reproduced in the *Archives of Empire* lends it a certain flavour and an importance making it one of the most significant interventions in South Asian Studies in recent times. Harlow and Carter seek to convey a certain sense of History by carefully selecting original documents and extracts from novels by those Britishers who often had a first-hand experience of the East, particularly the Indian subcontinent. In their selection of documents and extracts from these novels, Harlow and Carter lend a certain teleology to the book as they subscribe to certain themes which would otherwise impart a certain time-span and chronology to the work.

For instance the book begins by reproducing the texts of the early treaties between the East India Company and Indian Powers, initial acts passed by the East India Company like the Regulating Act of 1773 and minutes by subsequent Company ideologues such as James Mill and Thomas Macaulay. These ideologues sought to create a certain legitimacy for the Company rule in India on behalf of the Crown. In this case, they attempted to understand the essence of Indian civilization in their

own ways and accordingly prescribed the kind of British rule in the sub-continent. Naturally some of the early architects of colonial rule in the subcontinent like Clive got a prominent space. For instance, the book presents an extract from Henry George Alfred's novel on Clive. In this extract, Clive is presented as a notoriously free spirited lad and his mother as a despaired woman who had recently lost her husband and was barely left with anything. Struggling to find means for his further education, the extract tells us that a cadetship with the East India Company in India seemed like a last resort. The rest as we know is history. Clive in all his follies and avowed greatness is also colourfully depicted in an extract from Macaulay's essay on Clive in the book. While Clive is presented as one of those personalities who fashioned and shaped history by the force of their personalities and genius in the face of indomitable odds, there is also a prolonged discussion on Clive's alleged treachery towards Omichand, one of the key figures in the conspiracy against Siraj-Ud-Daulah, the then Nawab of Bengal. While Macaulay deems Clive's unfaithfulness as very un-British, he sums up the argument by pronouncing that Clive's accomplishments were far greater than his follies. In any case Macaulay concurs that Clive had no choice but to deceive Omichand who sought to engage in an elaborate deception game of his own, a game of treachery, typically Oriental in its nature.

Having dwelt on Clive extensively, the reader would expect similar generous space allotted to the other important personalities of this period. Curiously Warren Hastings does not figure in the first section but the reader need not be disappointed. An entire section, namely the third section is devoted to the impeachment of Warren

Hastings. Possibly Harlow and Carter feel that larger moral questions were centered on the impeachment of Hastings. The debates surrounding the impeachment proceedings against Hastings were about the fundamental nature of British rule in India, the sources from which it supposedly drew legitimacy, the moral constraints to which it was subject to, the checks and balances which should impinge on the functioning of the Company and a host of other issues.

While Hastings is indeed bestowed the honour of an entire section devoted to him for reasons understandable, it is ironical that the another important personality has an entire section devoted to him despite the fact that he was one of the most formidable foes the Company ever faced. This figure was none other than Tipu Sultan, a man admired, feared and reviled in his times and in contemporary India. By allocating considerable space to Tipu, Harlow and Carter seem to suggest that Tipu indeed was the greatest challenge that the Company ever faced possibly in the pre-1857 period. Tipu indeed assumes an image larger than life in the book.

The reviewer for one would be slightly circumspect about the centrality imparted to Tipu. Undoubtedly Tipu was a farsighted ruler in many respects who understood the many sided aspects of the Company's power. He strove manfully to counter the broad plane from which the Company derived its formidable resources and capacity to project power. In the end superior diplomacy of his enemies and the contradictions of his own position felled him, much to the relief of the British who feared, detested and possibly had a grudging admiration for him which they had for no other Indian ruler.

Yet Mysore as a rival was possibly not the greatest challenge the English faced from a native power. The Marathas and the Sikhs were perhaps the more formidable foes. Again it was in the end superior diplomacy which enabled the British to triumph over them. In both cases the margin between victory and defeat was narrow. Strangely the struggle against the Marathas and the Sikhs does not get a mention in this work. However an entire section is devoted to the *thuggees*. This section has extracts from Philip Meadows Taylor's novel on the *thuggees* and Colonel Sleeman's extensive writings on them. Due to ostensible reasons, suppression of the *thuggees* presented a fundamental challenge to the British who attempted to decriminalize the landscape and project themselves as a power which followed and upheld the universal rule of law meant for all. What could be the reason for the omission of the Marathas and the Sikhs? According to Harlow and Carter, one of the reasons could be that the struggle between Tipu and the Company was an intense ideological struggle, a struggle which the Company had to win at any cost if they intended to achieve hegemony

in the subcontinent. Here was an Indian ruler who dared to counter the British over a broad canvas. The battlefield for Tipu was one of the many fronts on which he sought to challenge the British, and he was ultimately offering a broader ideological challenge.

On the issue of ideology, it would be apt to mention that the book devotes an entire chapter on Orientalism. One though finds it strange that the section on Orientalism precedes the section on Warren Hastings who for the reviewer was the fountainhead of Orientalism, especially in the realm of policy making in British India. Casting this anomaly aside one would infer that the book rightly gives Orientalism and the notion of Oriental despotism a centrality in the scheme of things. Orientalism and Orientalists would impact the nature of Company rule in the subcontinent in a fundamental manner till the early decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed they would set the basis for the Company rule, notwithstanding the interventions by early Anglicists like Cornwallis. Therefore minutes and treatises by Oriental scholars and administrators seeking to understand and locate Indian civilization and accordingly tailor Company rule and policy in tune with the religious and social customs of the sub-continent deserve a detailed treatment.

Strangely though Harlow and Carter do not cover the transition from Orientalism to Utilitarianism directly. The section on law contains a detailed analysis of various minutes on *sati* by colonial scholars and officials. And it is here that Utilitarianism creeps in surreptitiously in the book. Strangely there is no direct mention of the role that Utilitarianism plays in the British deciding to legislate on Indian customs and traditions and bring in reforms. The British were now prepared to interfere in the religious and social customs of Indians provided they had scriptural backing, a fact amply brought out in Bentinck's minute on *sati* which is faithfully reproduced in this work. Though this kind of Utilitarian thinking was not a major break from the Orientalist thinking as is commonly evinced. But it undoubtedly marked a departure from the Orientalist phase in which the the British would not interfere in the social and religious life of natives at any cost, irrespective of any scriptural backing.

Indeed the British interventions on education should also be viewed in the light of the overall pressure exerted by the Utilitarians, Anglicists, Missionaries, free-traders in the early nineteenth century. Strangely Macaulay's minute on Indian education is included in the section on Orientalism. His minute on Indian Education would have been consigned to the dustbins even in the early years of the nineteenth century when Orientalists still held sway, thus meeting the same fate as Charles Grant's minute on education in 1793.

The sections on the Indian Mutiny and Suez Canal are adequate. The extracts from excerpts by colonial administrators, officials, novelists, historians, and first-hand accounts- all portray the essence of 1857 thus avoiding a monotonous and flat picture of 1857 from the view point of the British. Notwithstanding the richness of the documents on 1857 represented in the book an added flavour could have been lent by printing some of the native tracts, first-hand accounts, proclamations by various native rulers, and so on during the uprising of

1857 as has been attempted in the sections on *sati* and the *thuggees*.

The book ends with a detailed section on the multifaceted circumstances leading to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. One can hardly find issue with the authors regarding the importance they attach to the opening of the Suez Canal. For it was the beginning of a new era. Overall, notwithstanding certain disagreements this is a fundamental work which should be read by all scholars of South Asian history.