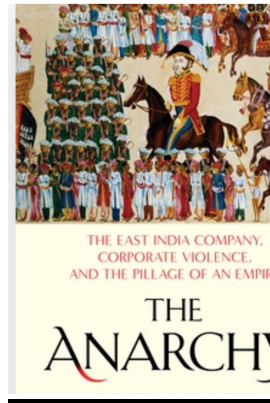


## **Book Review**



**William Dalrymple:** *The Anarchy, The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, Price: 699/p INR)

### **Partha Mondal<sup>1</sup>**

The Battle of Palasy in 1757, though regarded as nothing more than a mere skirmish, was an epoch making event which slowly but steadily led to the establishment of the English East India Company rule in Bengal and in India. Historians like Jadunath Sarkar, Rajat Kanta Roy and Sushil Chowdhury and others interpreted the Palasy episode from different angles and a debate arose out of it whether it was the British wilful intention to capture the throne of Bengal or the then circumstances of internal chaos of Bengal politics led to the

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Company's penetration. The latest addition to this genre is William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate violence And the Pillage of An Empire*. The book came out from Bloomsbury Publishing in 2019. Dalrymple is a specialist historian of the Mughals. His former two books namely *The White Mughals* (2002) and *The Last Mughal, The Fall Of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (2006) received a worldwide acclamation. The book, excepting Introduction and Epilogue etc, is covered with nine chapters.

While the other historians had ended their books with the defeat of Sirajuddaulh, the present author logically extended it up to the capture of Delhi by 1803. Dalrymple has started his book with a literary flavor with William Shakespeare's writing of the draft of Hamlet connecting the timing of the birth of English East India Company. The allegory is, no doubt, impressive as the conquering of India was both an error of circumstance as well as of judgment. A real Shakespearean tragedy. He paces the gradual revelation with a novelist skill.

Dalrymple's portrayal of Siraj's character as villain followed more or less the traditional view. To quote him, "Not one of the many sources for the period-Persian, Bengali, Mughal, French, Dutch or English has a good word to say about Siraj;.." (p82) It might be that Siraj had many drawbacks, but to ascribe him "to be the most cowardly of men" (82) as had been done by Jean Law, is historically not correct. Interestingly the first Bengali book on Siraj by Akshay Kumar Maitreya (*Siraj-uddullah*, first published, 1897), whom Dipesh Chakraborty described as a research oriented historian (*Itihaser janajiban o Ananya prapandha*, Kolkata, 2011, p-118=19) viewed Siraj otherwise. It may be some kind of nationalist spirit impelled him, yet it must be admitted that Siraj had neither betrayed his master nor sold his country.

While condemning Siraj's political incapability to alienate the Jagat Seth and accepting the conspiracy theory, Dalrymple has never spared the English for its unlimited greed for Bengal's money. Clive's personal share for the prize money was valued at 234,000 pound along with a jagir worth of annual income of 27,000 pound (p130). Not only alone Clive, the other members and the Council as well as the soldiers snatched as much as they could. The Chapter three, namely *Sweeping With the Broom of Blunder*, dealt with it brilliantly and objectively.

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The Company's dealings with Mirjafar, Mirkasim, Sujayddullah and The Emperor Shah Alam are mostly known to the students of history, But where Dalrymple excelled others is his chapter seven, namely the Desolation of Delhi. The peculiar inter-relationship among Shah Alam, the Marathas and the Rohillas made possible the restoration of the emperor on the one hand and the dissolution of the empire on the other. The Marathas promised to help Shah Alam in return of Rs.40 lakh. The emperor was lucky enough to have Mirza Najaf Khan, a Persian soldier who had been in the service of Mir-Kasim once, as his general. His selfless devotion for the cause of the Emperor was perhaps the only exception throughout the century where self interest had become the only rule. By this time the Company had stopped paying Rs.26 lakh as had been agreed in the Treaty of Allahabad of 1765. The Rohilas also posed a great danger for the Mughals. The Rohila leader Zabita Khan's attempt to conquer Delhi was thwarted by the Joint attack of Najaf Khan and Mahadaji Sindhia. Ghulam Quader, the son of Zabita Khan, was pardoned by the Emperor and gave shelter to him which was proved a fatal one in future. Quoting from the Swiss adventurer Antoine Polier, Dalrymple stated " ...the devastation and plunders of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Durrrani were violent tempests which carried everything before them but soon subsided, whereas the havoc made by the Rohillas over a decade resembled pestilential gales which keep up continual agitation and destroy a country." (p-274)

But the fortune did not smile for Shah Alam. Najab Khan's untimely death gave a rude jolt to the empire. Taking advantage of the situation Gulam Kader revolted. Just at that time (1778) Delhi and its neighborhood had been visited by a severe famine. The Marathas were busy in Puna following the death of Nana Faranbis. What followed next was a horrifying incident. Ghulam Kader captured Delhi, made an unprecedented loot, the Mughal zenanas in the harem were paraded nakedly in the street and then thrown to the Rohilla army for raping them. Shah Alam had to face severe torture and he was blinded. After returning from Puna the Marathas killed Ghulam Kader and again restored the emperor with their own terms. Chapter eight and Nine ( The impeachment of Warren Hastings and The Corpse of India respectively) have been dealt with the context of Napoleonic threat of conquering India through Egypt. The English under Wellesly was not ready to give it up. They, through tricks and strength, one by

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one defeated Nizam of Hyderabad, Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Maratha confederacy. Shah Alam surrendered and agreed to the terms of the English and remained till his death under the tutelage of the English.

The book under review is practically beyond any criticism. The author left no stone unturned to find out the relevant sources. His conclusion is very much relevant even today's multinational activities. Dalrymple categorically stated "The East India Company remains today history's most ominous warning about the potential for the abuse of corporate power..". The book has also been enriched by some of the beautiful coloured paintings of the Mughal art.