

The Prelude to Empire

The Prelude to Empire: Plassey Revolution of 1757 is a follow up of *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (1995), in which Chaudhury challenged the 'conventional wisdom' that the conquest of Bengal by the English was almost 'accidental' and that there were no 'calculated plottings' on behalf of the English behind the conquest. In this respect the author criticizes the position of scholars like S.C. Hill, B.K. Gupta, C.A. Bayly, and R.K. Roy, who all argued that the Plassey conspiracy was the handiwork of Indians and that political and economic crisis clouding over Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century brought in the British interference.

Review >

South Asia

By Bhaswati Bhattacharya

This book, the second by Chaudhury to explore the Plassey conspiracy, presents more evidence in support of his thesis that it was engineered and encouraged by the British, who were able to persuade the discontented courtiers of the Bengal nawab to stick to their 'project' of revolution (p.9).

As a result of the successive strong and stable regimes in the region, Bengal in the early eighteenth century was a land of plenty. While Bengal became the dominant partner in the European companies' Asiatic and European trade,

the major share in the export from the region and the import of bullion still belonged to Asian merchants (p.23–25). The author dismisses the claim that it was Siraj's antagonism towards the English and his intention to drive them out of Bengal that were responsible for the commencement of hostilities between the nawab and the English. It was the attitude of the English, especially the rigidity and belligerence of Drake, the English governor of Calcutta, which caused the outbreak of war against Siraj. Chaudhury asserts that there had not been an internal crisis – neither in the form of schism in the society nor in terms of economic decline – which would have caused and arguably legitimized British interference.

'Given the rivalry between the Asian merchants and their European counterpart, and the privileged position enjoyed by the former, there could be no question of collaboration between the two.' The English wanted to replace Siraj in the interest of their private trade.



There was a long but calculated transition period between the late 1660s and 1670s when, for the first time, the necessity of a shift from peaceful trade to armed trade in India was first suggested, and the 1750s, when the servants of the English East India Company became set on conquering territories in India. Indeed, the Plassey Revolution was not a mere coincidence (chapter 5). The role of the Indian conspirators in the 'drama' of Plassey was passive; they only joined the British when the latter took the initiative and provided leadership (p.113–114).

The book is interesting not only because it offers 'a completely new expla-

nation' for the Plassey revolution, but also because it shows that the historian does not necessarily have to play the role of judge when approaching sources. It is possible for the historian to assume, instead, the role of advocate of the cause of one of the partisans, in this case, the rulers and merchants of Bengal. <

- Chaudhury, Sushil, *The Prelude to Empire: Plassey Revolution of 1757*, Delhi: Manohar (2000), pp. 192, ISBN 81-7304-301-9.

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Bengal Studies >

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