

Partha Chatterjee. *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. xiv + 425 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15200-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-15201-1.

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The Bengali Cradle of Modern British Imperialism?

Partha Chatterjee's *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* is less a Gramscian analysis of the British East India Company's evolution to its role as professional administrator of colonized Bengal, as interpreted by a renown contributor to subaltern studies, than it is a Kautilyan analysis of the 1756 fall of British Fort William in Calcutta first to Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah and again to the British. Even this is insufficient to capture the tantalizing multilayered narrative of the history of British and Bengali constructed memories of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Here is the strength, and perhaps the frustrating challenge, of reading this book: Chatterjee speaks to many audiences of several scholarly levels in multiple discursive styles. This story of the Black Hole of Calcutta begins as a standard Western military history of a real battle resulting in the British evacuation of treasure and garrison staff and families at Fort William because hosting monarch Siraj ud-daulah refused to tolerate the excessive liberties that the British East India Company had taken in its tax-farming franchise. Some 143 British, mostly men, surrendered and Nawab Siraj ordered them to jail for the night of June 20, 1756. Instead of being held overnight in the jail outside of the fortress walls, they were pushed into a 14' x18' cell that was designed to hold four or five drunken soldiers. Poor ventilation, dehydration, and panic resulted in the deaths of 123 persons in that hot black hole of a prison cell that resembled for one night the concurrent conditions suffered by other people caught in other imperial struggles at the slave castles of Gorée Island and the Gold Coast. In this microhistory, Chatterjee pulls from several primary sources, including the published narrative written by John Holwell, who was the leader of the 143, to give so many details of that fateful week that one can imagine the faces and smell the perspiration of those who evacuated and of those who remained behind. Martyrdom memorialized in a Trafalgar Square-type obelisk outside of old Ft. William masked

the drain of wealth from Bengal to Britain for eighteenth-through twentieth-century merchant audiences. Chatterjee's narrative in chapters 1, 2, and 4 squares with other histories of colonial India and the British East India Company by Tripta Desai, Philip Lawson, Penelope Carson, Christopher Bayly, Niraja Jayal, and Sunil Agnani.[1]

In his third-chapter analysis of Indian-language contemporary histories of this time period, Chatterjee argues that India was experiencing its own modernity in which absolutism and anti-absolutism were debated by Mughal intellectuals, putting this book solidly in conversation with John Clarke's *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (1997). It is in this third chapter that Chatterjee reprises his earlier career as a military historian, for he chooses to present Haidar Tipu Sultan of Mysore, whose army included French military veterans. Readers familiar with Kautilya's *Artha-shastra* (fourth century BCE) recommendations will recognize them in Haidar's conduct of foreign policy and warfare against the *Firanghees*/British (p. 68). This Indocentric military subtext is interwoven so subtly that one could overlook it until one arrives in chapters 5 and 6, where it is cultivated further until it becomes a subject of other chapters. The long war sparked by the 1756 falls of Fort William continues in later chapters but it is a war differently fought. In the seventh chapter, Chatterjee marshals James Dalhousie and Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington through primary and secondary sources into the conceptual terrain of the logos of the law of nations (a European ideology bruised to the bone by Napoleon Bonaparte) that limped into the pens of Thomas Macaulay, Henry Maine, Carl Schmitt, and Charles Henry Alexandrowicz. This thoroughly researched chapter illuminates a war on the imperial British psyche in the form of the "normalization" of "the degree, sequence, combination, and points of ap-

plication of the pedagogical techniques of violence and culture” (pp. 186, 187). Is it traditional to infer that the British East India Company violated the British citizen?

The war continues in the eighth chapter, “The Pedagogy of Culture,” with Shakespeare dueling Bengali traditional *jatra* theater. In this chapter, the straightforward, linear military history about the memory of the Black Hole of Calcutta seems to enter postcolonial and post-modern conceptual space, which some expect of Chatterjee. One could comfortably complete the reading of this book on that pathway. However, Chatterjee’s study of Bengali *Othello* productions (p. 229) attracts another audience, a diaspora audience, to regard this story in the context of W. E. B. DuBois, Jawarhalal Nehru, and the Bandung Conference. It is a disconcerting chapter. Chatterjee the political military anthropologist goes even further in his nontraditional assemblage of traditional historiography and theory in the ninth chapter, “Bombs, Sovereignty and Football.” On this field he assembles Leopold II, Joseph Schumpeter, John Hobson, Rudolph Hilferding, and Rosa Luxemburg in his discussion of Bengali terrorism and football as presented in English and Bengali newspapers between 1905 and 1917. The imperial narrative is present, the Cold War historiography of the Communist Party in Bengal is rendered irrelevant, Mohandas Ghandi is decentered in the Indian independence movement, and the Western, social Darwinist myth of the effeminate Indian race is shattered as collateral damage, but to what end? The end, indeed several ends, are clearly identified in the tenth and concluding chapter, ends that evolve the discourse on globalization from Western imperialism to twenty-first-century

realities that are reshaping the behavior of the United Nations.

Chatterjee suggests that India’s early modern period was underway earlier than the British one and that historians should leave “the earlier period of British rule [in India] from the mid-eighteenth century to the 1820s or so open to an exploration of historical possibilities of transition not teleologically predetermined by the ascendancy of the colonial modern” (p. 76). Chatterjee gingerly digresses from the traditional interpretations of British imperialism in India and Bangladesh. He also re-centers this imperial narrative by including some Indocentric tropes, distinguishing an informative bibliography of Indian-language books and articles from those in European languages, and omitting a glossary. Some will see Partha Chatterjee’s *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* as a military anthropology of the Bengali civilization of British imperialism.

Notes

[1]. Tripta Desai, *The East India Company: A Brief Survey from 1599-1857* (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1984); Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (New York: Longman Group, 1993); Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698-1858* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012); Christopher A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Sunil M. Agnani, *Hating Empire Properly: The Two Indies and the Limits of Enlightenment Anticolonialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

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