

Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan formidable nemesis of Colonial British

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Abstract

Two of the most enduring characters in the Anglo-Indian pantheon of villains were the late eighteenth-century rulers of Mysore, Hyder Ali and his son, the infamous Tippu Sultan. Their reputations, in particular that of Tippu, were almost as important in the creation of the India in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imagination as the actual fact of their defeat. No other subcontinental ruler enjoyed the terrifying reputation that Tippu did. He was at once the bogeyman, the proof that Indian rulers were duplicitous tyrants and proof that, no matter what Orientalists and others said of the past, any powerful Indian ruler was ultimately an evil despot.

An idea of the depth of feeling aroused by these two monarchs can be gathered from the depiction of Tippu towards the end of the period covered by this book. This was based on the accounts of those who had fought him (and been captured) and on apocrypha and romantic reconstructions of his life, tastes and effects. In a classic case of person being recognized by his possessions, Tippu was (and is) often associated with a mechanical toy depicting a European being savaged by a tiger. That singular object, found in the music room of his palace after his death in 1799.

Tippu's innovative spirit that has been admired by some biographers was actually counterproductive in that it was guided less by genuine impulse than by "the whim of the moment." To quote Michaud again, the Sultan's love of new inventions amounted to no more than an expensive hobby that incurred incredible expenses for stuff such as swords, daggers, pistols, and muskets. Tippu's policy of emasculating the poligars, the powerful military nobility, destroyed the base of the strength of his realm. This situation worsened further after the Treaty of Srirangapatnam of 1792 as the state of Mysore suffered severe financial and territorial loss, and reduction of its former formidable military.

Keywords: Treaty of Srirangapatnam, Mysore, Anglo-Mysore wars, The Sword of Tippu Sultan

Introduction

According to biographer Narendra Krishna Sinha, Haider "was not an innovative ruler. He generally followed the established practices and also respected the local customs and laws of each region under his sway." Nonetheless, Haider was not devoid of innovative measures: he initiated the proto-modernisation of the military establishment. In *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization Under Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan*, Irfan Habib underlines that Haider's "regime was untouched by any other efforts to develop technology and commerce on modern lines, let alone obtain an opening to science or enlightenment." In contrast to Habib, some historians exaggerate Tippu Sultan's modern characteristics. Mohibbul Hasan writes that Tippu was an "enlightened and tolerant ruler" and in Asok Sen's view Tippu

was free from “Eastern conservatism.” Sheik Ali commends Tippu’s “flair for modernization” and believes: “If Tippu had not been disturbed by wars he would have perhaps brought about an industrial revolution to Mysore.” Other historians overemphasise Tippu’s pre-modern traits. Kate Brittlebank argues that, “Innovations and reforms were not so much the result of caprice or the actions of ‘a modern thinker,’ but, rather, part of the expected role of the king as defined by the cultural traditions of the region.” Irfan Habib’s opinion is that, “Tippu’s intellectual horizons ...remained restricted to the old inherited learning. Here his innovations ran either on traditional lines...or into eccentricities...Tippu and his Mysore were, therefore, still far away from a real opening to modern civilization, despite his own bold and restless endeavours.” How can historians chart a middle course between such opposing views? This paper argues that Haider and, later, his son Tippu were transitional figures who were neither predominantly modern nor pre-modern. Haider Ali Haider Ali was born between 1717 and 1722. He had three older half-brothers and an elder brother by the name of Shahbaz or Ismael Sahib. Haider’s ancestors reached India by sea before the end of the sixteenth century. Few facts are known about Haider’s ancestors. Barun De maintains that Haider’s lineage was of “Sufi plebeian” social origin. However, it is certain that Haider’s father, Fath Mohammad, was a professional soldier in the service of nawab (Muslim governor) Saadatullah Khan of Arcot during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Mohammad Shah (1719–48).

Objective:

This paper seeks to examine the political motivation behind skirmishes between Tippu Sultan and British imbued with Haider Ali’s sagacity

Haider Ali's success Story

The key to Haider’s success was courage, determination, diplomatic and military skills, as well as the might of his semi-modern army. While Haider always remained, in title, subordinate to the Hindu Raja of Mysore, he had full command. He also obtained the title of “Khan” and the office of faujdar of Sira in 1761. Haider appointed a successor to Chik Krishna Raja when he died in 1766. Over time, Haider grew more powerful and considerably enlarged the territory of Mysore. He annexed Bednur, Sira, Sonda, Baramahal, Palaghat, areas of Malabar and Maratha territories in Karnataka. Under Haider, Mysore grew more powerful. In spite of all this, ‘Ali Khan, the Nizam of Hyderabad, regarded Haider to be nothing more than a mere zamindar. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi argues that the Nizam: “Felt justified in planning the destruction of Haider Ali because he considered him to be a mere usurper with no right to his territories.”¹⁹ Haider usually went to bed after midnight and woke up about six o’clock in the morning. He fluently spoke Hindustani, Kannada, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil. But he could not read or write and the only formal education that he had was as a soldier.

Nonetheless, the German Protestant missionary Christian Friedrich Schwartz wrote that he had an excellent memory and French sources portrayed him as administrating his darbar (court) better than any other prince of Asia. Maistre de la Tour, an employee in Haider’s army, relaid that, “There is no sovereign more easy of access to every one that has business with him, whether strangers or subjects; and the former whatever may be their quality, are always sure to be introduced into his presence, by demanding an audience, by a Soutahdar, or macebearer, of which there is always a sufficient number at the gate of his palace.” Accounts by Schwartz, Maistre de la Tour and others also suggest that Haider possessed a strong sense

of justice and he did not shy away from punishing officials (e.g., horsekeepers and tax collectors) who mistreated the poor and powerless. He even punished officials of high rank in public. His sons and sons-in-law were also flogged if they had done something wrong. Schwartz observed that Haider protected abandoned boys and assembled a battalion consisting exclusively of orphans. He fed and clothed the boys, to whom Haider gave little wooden muskets to practice military training. State-owned orphanages had the purpose of recruiting abandoned boys into his army.

At Arcot, Fath Mohammad commanded 600 foot, 500 horse and 50 rocket men. For unknown reasons, he left his employment in the service of Saadatullah Khan and joined the Raja (ruler) of Mysore—from whom he obtained the title of naik (corporal). He did not stay long owing to discord among the various chiefs in Mysore. He went to Sira (Karnataka) and became a Mughal faujdar (military official)—this time in the service of the nawab Dargah Quli Khan—where he commanded 400 foot soldiers and 200 horsemen. When Fath Mohammad died (c. 1728), Haider may have been as young as five and his brother Ismael eight. Fath Mohammad was in debt and some sources reported that Dargah Quli Khan's grandson Abbas captured and tortured the boys after he took remaining belongings of the family. Fath Mohammad's widow informed her husband's nephew, Haider Sahib, about their plight and obtained their release through help from the subahdar (provincial governor) of Sira and Devraj (Commander-in-Chief and brother of the powerful Mysore finance minister Nanjaraj), who invited them to Srirangapatna. In the capital of Mysore, Haider Sahib treated the two boys like his own sons and taught them the art of fighting and cavalry. Nevertheless, we know very little about the environment in which Haider was raised, nor how old he was when he entered the army. Haider 'Ali's elder brother, succeeded Haider Sahib after his death. Haider 'Ali was initially attached to his brother's detachment. His courage, especially during the siege of Devanhalli (near Bangalore) in 1749, convinced Nanjaraj to award him with the title of "Khan" and the separate command of 200 foot soldiers and 50 horsemen. In 1750, Haider and his Bedar peons (irregular infantry) captured a portion of the treasure of the assassinated Nasir Jang, the Nizam of Hyderabad. He was thus able to increase the number of soldiers at his command.

He also recruited French deserters to train his troops. He impressed Nanjaraj, again, during the Trichinopoly Campaign and, on returning to Mysore, was appointed as the faujdar of Dindigul (c. 1755). He further enlarged his troops and employed French engineers to organise his regular artillery, arsenal and laboratory. After the death of his brother (c. 1756), Haider succeeded him because Ismail Sahib had no male children. In his new position, he commanded 15,000 soldiers— including 200 Europeans and 3000 cavalry. However, starting in the mid-1750s, Srirangapatna became very unstable. The relationship between the powerless Raja of Mysore and the two brothers Devraj and Nanjaraj was getting bad. Devraj and Nanjaraj were in such dispute regarding their policies towards the Raja that the former resigned his government position in 1757. War expenses and invasions by the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Marathas had concurrently emptied the state treasury. Troops who had not been paid for months decided to block the delivery of water and provisions to Nanjaraj's house. However, Haider proved capable of placating the ministers as well as paying off the troops. As a consequence, the Raja of Mysore appointed him Commander-in-Chief when the Marathas invaded Mysore in 1758. He succeeded in obtaining advantageous peace terms with the Marathas. When Nanjaraj decided to retire, Haider seized power. After he successfully thwarted a conspiracy by his divan (finance minister) Khande Rao and the Raja, no one challenged his power.

Schwartz was so impressed by Haider's care for orphans that he believed that the British should follow his example. Haider gave Schwartz a sum of 300 rupees to sponsor the building of such an orphanage. With regard to Haider's administration,

Schwartz and Wilks observed that, he “orders one man to write a letter and read it to him; then he calls another to read it again. If the writer has in the least deviated from his orders, his head pays for it.”²⁷ Schwartz affirmed that fear was one of Haider’s most important means of rule; whereas, he also rewarded good behaviour. To be respected, prevent treason, increase the efficiency of his administration and, ultimately, sustain his rule, Haider felt obliged to pursue a policy of reward and punishment. The German historian Mathias Christian Sprengel (1746–1803) wrote that Haider was the first “Indian prince,” after emperor Aurengzeb and the Maratha ruler Shivaji (c.–80), to attract European attention. In 1781, the French Compagnie des Indes praised that Haider played an incredibly important role in Indian affairs. In part due to such praise, the British and Haider began to regard each other as archenemies. Haider became increasingly aware of the danger that the British posed to the sovereignty of Indian rulers like himself.

Haider’s hostility towards the British increased as a result of his own experiences with the East Indian Company (EIC). Despite the fact that it was agreed upon in a 1769 treaty, the EIC did not give him assistance when the Marathas attacked him in 1770. He wrote that, “Another thing they assured me [was that] they were not going to Mahe Bunder, yet they went in a manner unknown to me.”³² Schwartz also confirmed that EIC did not keep its word and that it was unwilling to peacefully coexist with Mysore. He reported that the British governor of Madras was not interested in peace because he engaged an agent to collect money from him. It should not come as a surprise that Haider angrily sent the British agent away and took preparatory military measures to defend Mysore from the EIC. Haider noted that, “The English first try to secure a footing in other territories by outward professions of friendship and then gradually they bring them under their full sway.”³⁴ Haider’s rule can be characterised as generally autocratic and centralistic.

Nevertheless, he was pragmatic and respected by the local population. Twenty years after his death, the Scottish physician and naturalist Francis Buchanan (1762–1829) observed that, “On account of his justice, wisdom, and moderation, his memory is greatly respected by the natives of all descriptions.” Father Schwartz even compared Haider favorably to the Prussian King Frederick the Great (1712–86): “In his accuracy, in his astuteness against the violators of his orders, in his efforts to regulate and improve his army, in the daily and strictest reply of letters that he receives, there are some traits of sameness. But the astonishing difference between them is that your king [Frederick] is an erudite prince, whereas Haider cannot read. Nonetheless, no one is able to deceive him.” Innes Munro similarly wrote in mid-1780 that, “Many have compared the military genius and character of Hyder Ally to those of the renowned Frederick the Second, king of Prussia; and indeed, when we consider the distinguished abilities of that prince amongst his contemporaries in this country, and the intrepid manner by which he has established himself upon the throne of Misore, and extended his dominions, one cannot but allow the simile to be exceedingly just.”

Tippu Sultan: The Tiger of Mysore

Tippu’s encounter with the foreigners reveals that he was not against their presence in his domain; he actually wanted them to comply with his commands, however capricious or contumelious. He was willing to take the help of foreign powers to expel the one he hated. Thus, he had little qualms wooing the Turks, Afghans, and the French into alliance. Tippu in fact asked the Afghan strongman Zaman Shah Abdali (Durrani) (r. 1793-1800) to invade North India and is reported to have candidly confided to Lieutenant-Colonel Russel, commanding officer of the French detachment in the Mysore army: “I want to expel them [the British] from India. I want to be the friend of the French all my life” (Lafont, 2001, p. 99). He even

wrote the government of Isle de France (Mauritius) proposing an indissoluble “treaty of alliance and fraternity” creating a family bond between the two states (Martin, 1837, p. 2).³

Tippu’s measures and policies have been variously interpreted, often with forceful generalizations by historians in India and abroad as eclectic and modern (Habib, 1999). One scholar claimed that he “was so innovative and dynamic that, had not destiny cut short his life, he would have ushered Mysore into an industrial age” (Ali, 2002, p. 21). Another speculated that had Tippu been the ruler of Bengal instead of Siraj-ud-daula, the “history of the 18th century India would have been materially different” (Subhan, 2002, p. 44). Actually, all his measures including renaming his government as some kind of a divine endowment (khudadadsarkar) or reorganizing his army into ilahi or ahmadi consisting of slaves or chelas (Muslim converts) were both military and Islamic in tone (Rao, 1948). Burton Stein’s description of the Sultan’s administrative financial organization reveals the construction of an extractive government (Stein, 1989). The Governor of Madras Thomas Munro (1761-1827) considered Tippu’s Mysore as “the most simple and despotic monarchy in the world” (Glieg, 1830, pp. 1, 84). Tippu basically belonged to that class of rulers who could be classified as feudal autocratic. To him, visible evidence of personal loyalty and security of his regional hegemony were extremely meaningful.

We have reports of Tippu’s wanton cruelty. Major Alexander Allan (1764-1820) reports on Tippu’s murdering the European captives on April 28, 1799, the very day he was negotiating with Lieutenant-General Harris for peace terms. “Of the real character of this Prince,” Allan writes, we hitherto have been ignorant! But now it will be placed in its true light. That he was suspicious, vindictive, cruel and hurried away by the sadder impulse of passion, to which he was subjected even without any apparent provocation, is certain and probably it will be found that he was more deficient in military talents, and others as essential to govern an extensive kingdom than has been generally imagined. (cited in Rao, 1948, Vol. 3, p. 1025)

Lieutenant-Colonel William Kirkpatrick (1756-1813) writes that once the Sultan ordered his brother-in-law Burhanuddin Khan to mount an assault on a region including “every living creature in it, whether man or woman, old or young, child, dog, cat, or any living thing, else, must be put to the sword” (Kirkpatrick, 1811, Letter # 85 dated July 10, 1785, italics in original). Kirkpatrick (1811) writes further, “Colonel Munro [Sir Hector, 1726-1805] assures me, that it is an absolute fact that on one occasion he [Tippu] ordered all the male population of a particular village which had given him offence, to be castrated” (p. 3, translator’s “Observations” on Letter # 1 dated February 17, 1785).

Tippu was a regnant ruler keenly conscious of personal prestige and dignity, but could not command loyalty from his own officers, witness the conduct of his dewans, the Muslim Mir Sadiq as well as the Hindu Purnaiya and others, whom even the writers of Hyderabad, Tippu’s enemy territory, refer to as “seditious people” (Gopal, 1971, p. 91). Colonel Robert Clive, the victor of Plassey (1757), had observed perceptively in his letter to British Prime Minister William Pitt (r. 1756-1762, 1766-1768): “The natives themselves have no attachment whatever to a particular prince, they would rejoice in so happy an exchange as that of a mild [British] for a despotic [Indian] Government” (Malcolm, 1836, Vol. 2, pp. 119-125).

Most probably, Tippu was more feared than respected or loved by his subjects. As the French historian and publicist Joseph Michaud (1767-1839) writes, If his ministers dared to combat his opinion he stared at them in a threatening manner and replied to them in words of disdain and insult. Thus his true friends seeing that their frankness only created resentment in the sovereign, which became fatal to them, began to accommodate their opinion to the caprices of their master and the unhappy Tippoo was surrounded only by his courtiers who praised all his plans and applauded all his fantasies. (Michaud, 1801-1809/1985, pp. 157-158)⁴

Speaking of Tippoo, Major James Rennell (1742-1830) observed perspicaciously as early as 1792: He is unquestionably the most powerful of all the native princes of Hindoostan; but the utter detestation in which he is held by his own subjects, renders it improbable that his reign will be long. (cited in Rao, 1948, Vol. 3, p. 1230)

Major Allan, who knew the Sultan at firsthand, observed, It is impossible that Tippoo could have been loved by his people. The Musselmen [Musalmans] certainly looked up to him as the head of their faith; by them, perhaps, his death is regretted but they could not have been attached to him, by affection. (cited in Rao, 1948, p. 1025)

Conclusion

The hubbub over the Indian national television (Doordarshan) serial “The Sword of Tippu Sultan” (1989) based on a colorful characterization of the man by a popular fiction writer BhagwanGidwani demonstrates the curious interplay of communal politics and academic polemics. The television docudrama presented Tippoo as a patron of the Hindus and a patriotic martyr who died fighting the imperialist English. This serial incensed some historians and numerous lay viewers, including the Malayalee Samajam (Malayalee Association) of Mumbai and the people of Kerala and elsewhere, who voiced their dissent from what they considered the “pseudo-secularism” of the contemporary government of India (Muthanna, 1980).¹⁸ The renegades’s stand was projected in an anthology titled *Tippu Sultan: Villain or Hero?* edited by Sita Ram Goel (1995).¹⁹ The authors of this collection agreed that Tippoo was no multicultural hero and, as the reviewer of this book summed up, “Indian State TV’s promotion of the serial’s pseudo-history, in the name of secularism no less, was a flagrant exercise of pseudo-secularism” (Walia, 2004).

Tippu Sultan was no nationalist freedom fighter, the novelist Gidwani’s sentimental description of Sultan notwithstanding. Admittedly, Tippoo was an inveterate enemy of the English. But “his alternative to the English was not some kind of Great-India, the alternative was the French” and had Tippoo been victorious, “one colonial power would have been replaced by another” (Strandberg, 1995, p. 157).²⁰ It is time we arrived at a reasonably realistic assessment of Tippu Sultan. If it is fair to maintain that Tippoo was an energetic, assiduous, and industrious ruler and an immensely brave soldier, it is also reasonable to consider reports of his haughtiness and hubris. Despite many adulatory assessments, it is quite obvious on the basis of several eyewitness accounts that Tippoo, fed by the flattery of his sycophants, came to believe that he was the

greatest prince of Hindustan, if not of the world. This benighted narcissism rendered him deaf to any admonition from his well-wishers and led to his ultimate nemesis.

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