

The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power

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Popular references to Calcutta (now Kolkata) – once the gleaming capital of British India – in Anglo-American contexts often conjure images of poverty, crowded city streets, unbearable traffic, smog, and residents that require a savior. Patrick Swayze and Lisa Niemi's 2009 memoir (1) includes a description of his performance in Roland Joffe's 1992 *City of Joy*, the film adaptation of Dominique Lapierre's 1985 novel of the same name. Swayze portrays Max, a jaded Texas doctor who searches for spiritual enlightenment in Calcutta to work as serving the poorest of the poor. Not only did the film project the image of Calcutta as a place beyond saving, but Swayze himself remarks about how he was assigned by the director to travel himself to Calcutta to prepare for his work. He diligently prepared for his role at home and then 'went to the black hole of Calcutta' (p. 181). After discussing the smog, the dirt, the eerie lighting at night, he ends his description with a casual reference to 'the black hole', which, for English readers, must link Calcutta with the characteristics of backwardness and poverty. In the 2012 film *Avengers*, the savior Bruce Banner tries to keep his inner Hulk in control as he attempts to save leprosy victims in Calcutta, invoking familiar images of poverty, over-crowdedness, congested streets, and people in need of a savior. As critics of *Avengers* have opined, the vision of Calcutta in the film was 'a complete throwback to an older idea of India, where the lights are dim and the televisions flicker feebly, where wide eyed children tug at the sleeves of the good phoren doctor'.(2) Though the 'Calcutta' portions were shot in New Mexico, critics also stated that the city looked quite similar to the area depicted in *City of Joy*, twenty years earlier – 'cramped, squalid, leprous'.(3)

A discursive coherence to the representations of Calcutta as cramped and squalid emanates not only from popular-cultural American Orientalism, but from a longer history of imperial practices in colonial India, as discussed by Partha Chatterjee in *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*. The

story of the Black Hole of Calcutta, well known to historians of India, and well known to travelers to India from the 18th century through the late 19th century, finds an odd place in the history of India and the history of modern empires. Though probably cited in popular ways by many amateur Indian history buffs, professional historians seem to have forgotten about it. The Black Hole refers to the site where allegedly many Europeans (the precise number has never been settled in the historiography, though the fact that some people died is beyond dispute) died by suffocation as prisoners of Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah, Bengal's ruling *nawab*, in 1756. This signature event led to a chain of conflicts and encounters that ultimately resulted in the English East India Company's conquest of Bengal in the late 18th century, coinciding with their political rise in Southern Asia and the loss of the American colonies.

By the mid 19th century, most of what is now the nation-state of India, was conquered by the British Empire. The colonial encounters between Europeans and India at discursive and material levels generated landmark debates and historical changes about issues central to the modern world, such as the nature of capitalism, the spread and role of the modern state, the extent and desirability of imperialism, and the nature of nationalism and decolonization in Asia. These modern encounters, at some level, derive their potency from the starting point of conquest, during and immediately after the literal Black Hole incident in the 1750s. The 'Black Hole of Calcutta', therefore, comprises a story that not only commands lasting rhetorical power in popular Anglo-American culture, but also refers to one of the most important events in the history of the modern world.

Partha Chatterjee, the pioneering political theorist, historian, and one of the pioneers of subaltern studies, argues that the 'forgetting' of the story by professional historians and the maintenance of a certain image of Calcutta in the popular imagination, actually tells a larger story about the nature of empire in the modern world. In this book, he tells the story of how the narrative itself changed and impacted different writers – European and Indian – but also claims that the history of Empire is best understood through a coherent faithfulness to a certain type of *mythos*. Chatterjee tracks such a history of *mythos* through the history of the story.

In ten chapters, Chatterjee provides a narrative of the Black Hole story and its physical manifestations, as they slip in and out of the historical record. Interspersed with the narrative are a series of critiques of political thought and imperial historiography. His first chapter, 'Outrage in Calcutta,' includes a preface to his narrative of 'the mythical history of the British Empire in the East' (p. 1) with a brief disquisition on the nature of black holes, which establishes the claim upon which the entire book is built. Chatterjee offers an analogy of the history of modern empires through a comparison with black holes in space: just like scientists infer the existence of black holes without direct observation, historians and present-day critics and political analysts often detect the presence of imperial practices, without a grasp of empire's discursive history. In order to address the discursive history of empires in the modern age, he pursues 'many layers of narrative and doctrine that lay buried under our currently fashionable postimperial edifice of the global community of nations' (p. 1).

Chatterjee begins with an analysis of a monument that represents how the *mythos* of empire has impacted Indians, through a tour through the famous monument in Calcutta's St. John's Churchyard. Completed in 1902, under the direction of then Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, this monument was erected in memory of the victims of the 'Black Hole' incident in 1756. The monument leads him to reflect on how various place names and relationships to space, empire, and nation are literally inscribed in the built environment of India. From this point, he starts his story, as he claims that 'to trace the movement of the Black Hole Memorial is to unravel the mythical history of empire' (p. 6).

In this first chapter, the author provides a detailed history of the conflicts between the English East India Company (and in particular, Clive) and Siraj-ud-daulah, as the newly ascendant *nawab* of Bengal. His chapter two, 'A secret veil', begins with an analysis of political theory regarding sovereignty in the early modern period, by providing a schematic listing of the different positions on conquest and sovereignty in discussions amongst European powers. He also begins a critical literary history of how the Black Hole story and its representatives in literal structures (the memorials) changed over time.

Introducing Orme, the first author of English language histories of the Black Hole in 1763, Chatterjee establishes how Orme sets the standard for how discussions about conquest would proceed, based on both the idea that Indians were naturally servile to those in power and that Europeans had the right to retaliate and reclaim territory if serving a higher purpose of conquest. But at this stage, in the late 18th century, the discursive meaning of empire still demonstrated ambivalence about its origins, as writers such as Burke and others aimed for a 'a secret veil' to be shrouded over the signs of duplicity and treachery that accompanied the conquest of Bengal by Europeans. It is in this context that the original memorial for the survivors of the Black Hole incident was taken down in 1821, as Chatterjee mentions at the end of chapter two.

In chapter three, 'Tipu's Tiger,' Chatterjee continues to analyze the discursive history of conquest and sovereignty (how these important aspects of empire's 'Black Hole'-ness were understood by historical actors) through the late 18th-century history of European conquest in other regions of India, notably southern India, and the fall of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the Sultanate of Mysore from 1782–99. An active diplomat and ally of the rising Napoleonic force in Europe and Africa, Tipu Sultan represents what Chatterjee delineates as one aspect of 'early modernity' in South Asian history. He introduces the idea of the 'absolutist early modern' and the 'anti-absolutist early modern' and concludes that an 'absolutist early modern' formation appeared in various parts of India in the 17th and 18th centuries. For Chatterjee, this 'absolutist early modern' form included various elements such as the need to establish state sovereignty, the comparability of power, creating new disciplines via the military, and focusing on effective leadership and skills, not lineage or status. This 'absolutist early modern' formation was most effectively harnessed by Tipu Sultan, in his modernization of his military, fiscal revenue collection, trading practice, irrigation, cultivation, and his gun and saltpeter factories developed in his domain.

Chapter four, 'The liberty of subjects,' and chapter five, 'The equality of subjects' establish the other part of Chatterjee's characterization of early modern India, that of the 'anti-absolutist early modern'. As the 'absolutist early modern' form was taking shape in Tipu Sultan's realm in south India, in Calcutta of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Chatterjee shows how a multi-racial intelligentsia of Bengali Hindus, Europeans, and mixed-race subjects of the British Empire started to press for radical and proto-democratic representative institutions and privileges. In chapter four, he discusses the first movements to establish, promote, and push for 'rights' – here in the 1780s, by James August Hickey, who started *Hickey's Bengal Gazette*. In this publication, the editor and contributors aggressively pursued the right to critique corruption in the Company as well as the liberty to publish and circulate journal copies outside of the Company's interference. This, for Chatterjee, 'enunciated perhaps for the first time in a British colony in the East, a classic antiabsolutist statement of the innate and inalienable liberty of the freeborn British subject' (p. 111). Though a growing racialized order was visibly appearing in urban transformations of public space, as he details in these two chapters, he also discusses how Indians, such as Rammahon Roy, the pioneering intellectual and social critic of the age, asserted the equality of subjects.

In chapter six, 'The happiness of mankind', Chatterjee returns to a critical textual analysis of how the Black Hole figures in English-language writings from the late 18th century onward. Here, he dissects Macaulay (infamous for his 1834 minute on education in which he professed his belief in the innate superiority of Western literatures to Oriental literatures) and his writings about Clive and the Black Hole incident in the 1840s. Macaulay's essay on Clive, read by schoolchildren in the metropole, turned the Black Hole story into a founding myth of empire. This founding myth was sustained because for Macaulay, Clive's moral improprieties (ambivalently hidden in the 'secret veil' phase earlier) were condoned because he initiated what would later be good government in India. As Chatterjee states, Macaulay made

empire safe from its own infamous origins. The secret veil could now be lifted. Clive's history could be taught to British schoolchildren as a fable of moral instruction, to instill pride in their hearts not merely for the valor of their compatriots but also for the selfless service they were rendering to the people of the empire (p. 167).

Chapters seven 'A pedagogy of violence' and eight, 'A pedagogy of culture' return to political theory and the nature of imperial practice, after the periods of 'absolutist early modern' and 'antiabsolutist early modern' politics had faded. Chatterjee argues that by the 1840s empire functioned on pedagogic grounds, and by one of two models only: violence, exemplified by rapacious territorial conquest in the mid to late 19th century, and culture, in which education, language and literature, the arts would all develop in tandem with Europeans, but on segregated lines, refracted through the lens of colonial difference. In chapter eight, Chatterjee discusses the arena of Bengali popular theater, where cultural appropriations of various acts of interpretation of the Black Hole incident appeared from the 1870s through the 1900s. In these plays, by writers such as Nabin Chandra Sen and Akshaykumar Maitreya, produced by the famed regisseur-director Girishchandra Ghosh, Chatterjee traces a glimmer of resistance to the various discursive practices of empire examined in earlier chapters. Sen's 1875 *Palashir Juddhya* (The War of Palashi)

gestured, if only rhetorically, to the possibility that Bengal under Siraj, although badly governed, was at least sovereign, and therefore free, and had a state where even though the ruler was a Muslim, Hindus nonetheless enjoyed positions in the highest echelons of government (p. 242).

In chapters nine 'Bombs, sovereignty, and football' and 'The death and everlasting life of empires', Chatterjee shifts the focus to the popular sport of football in late colonial Bengal as well as rising nationalist sentiment against the Holwell monument marking a new memorialization of the Black Hole victims. This last monument, built by Curzon, in 1902, appeared in the midst of rising nationalist agitation and four decades later, as Chatterjee shows, immense public mobilization on behalf of Indian football teams competing against European teams. By the early 1940s, Chatterjee argues, the public culture of Bengal's sporting world and nationalist activists had merged, such that the nationalist opposition to the Holwell monument, which began in earnest in 1940, included the large world of football fans. As he states in chapter ten, 'it is quite certain that there was considerable overlap between the public that celebrated the victories of Mohun Bagan or Mohammadan Sporting Clubs on the Maidan, the public that agitated for the removal of the Holwell monument, and the murderous public that went on a rampage on the streets and in the slums of Calcutta' (p. 335).

The chapter, and the entire book, ends with an 11-page analysis of empire's discursive and practical career in the present day, along with a concise statement of the book's anchoring claim, which is demonstrated through his history of the conquest of India: 'the most reliable definition of an imperial practice remains that of the privilege to declare the exception to the norm' (p. 337). He lists examples of this privilege of declaring the exception to a norm constructed by those in pre-eminent nation-state power (previously, by those in imperial power), such as the decision of who gets to sit on the UN Permanent Security Council, the decision

of who acceptably may house nuclear weapons, the decision to allow for differential treatment of victims of tragedies. In this final example, he compares the way that American victims of the recent BP gas spill have been treated compared to the victims of the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal, India, in 1984. Furthermore, as a way to demonstrate how the career of empire's technologies live in the present day, he mentions how imperial ventures today by powerful states like the United States proceed both by pedagogical discourses of violence (justified in Iraq by the United States) and through non-violent means (Saudi Arabia and Burma, as examples).

Chatterjee has produced a virtuoso performance that integrates a powerful combination of narrative history and political thought. He has mastered a diverse set of archives rare for historians, such as the treasures of dramatic literature, fiction, historical writing, urban history, and histories of space. His extensively researched narrative history is fruitfully interrupted with exciting discussions related to present-day politics and historiography.

Chatterjee conducts a cultural history by employing various strategies of reading texts, aimed not at empirical certitude or sociological clarity, but aimed at the resolution of the genealogy of enduring discursive questions. The need for precise empirical research, then, does not accord the same meaning as it would for a social history (as an example of another methodological approach to history). But might questions of social history complicate the way that Chatterjee interprets the history that is required to make sense of his critique of political thought? There are two ways that questions of social history may complicate his own presentation: one, through an exploration of alternative textual readings of the very same sources he offers and two, an assessment of the global reach of the 'Black Hole' narrative. Chatterjee opens his book with the claim that 'the global phenomenon of modern empire' (p. xi) is represented by the history of this story. Pursuing these avenues into his work opens a window into a larger question about the way hegemony is conceptualized in Chatterjee's book and the implications of this conceptualization for the writing of history.

Though the texts Chatterjee interprets are certainly multi-faceted and deserving of close readings, do any alternative reading strategies uncover underlying discursive elements that went into the making of those texts? In his section 'One the poetic and historical imagination', he offers a wonderfully detailed analysis of representations of Siraj-ud-daulah in the writings of Bengali Hindus, like Nabin Chandra Sen, and his play *Palasir yuddha*, first published in 1875, produced in the 1870s and also in the 1890s. In this play, Siraj appears as a cutthroat tyrant, probably due to the English and English-inflected sources about him that Sen received. This depiction received a critique about 20 years later by Akshaykumar Maitreya, who countered Nabin Chandra Sen's depictions of Siraj by using varieties of new evidence from the period. Maitreya showed him as a 'absolutist ruler fighting to defend the sovereignty of the state, which he believed was the precondition for peace and prosperity in the kingdom' (p. 245). This move not only showed sympathy and humanity for Siraj, countering Orientalist and stereotypical constructions of Muslim rulers, but created the 'foundations of nationalist anticolonial historiography' (p. 243). Chatterjee then discusses the 'dramatic national popular,' worked out by playwrights and theater artists in the wake of these debates, as led by Girishchandra Ghosh in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Chatterjee's exposure of these debates and tracing of the origins of nationalist thought are detailed and nuanced. But there are two areas in his presentation that cry out for more expansion. One, though he mentions without any notes or references that 'Muslim critics had often complained about the unfair portrayal of Siraj in Nabinchandra's *Palasir yuddha*' (p. 242), he devotes not a single line to any Muslim Bengali writers, critics, or political figures who had a stake in this entire debate. It is not incumbent upon Chatterjee to offer an analysis of each and every text and/or community that produced responses to these sorts of discourses, but a history of discourse without any grappling with the social markers on the ground leaves readers wondering about the historicity of these moments. When discussing how such a nationalist and idealized form of India's past came to occupy these writers through the figure of Siraj, Chatterjee does not discuss how this very form potentially *excluded* Muslims from taking an active role in the nationalist imagination in this particular way. As Chatterjee states, Nabin Chandra Sen provided

the key elements of the rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim fraternity that would ring out so loudly in the days of the Swadeshi movement... This was not the fraternity premised on the abstract citizen-subject, grounded in homogenous and equal citizenship, and then handed down as the liberal ideal of civic nationalism, most exemplarily since the French Revolution. Rather it was based on Hindus and Muslims constituting distinct communities that were nonetheless bound by the solidarity of naturalized kinship (p. 249).

Such a textual reading may provide quite insightful for understanding Nabin Chandra Sen as well as nationalists who also reproduced this rhetoric, but does it apply to Muslim intellectuals of the same time period? Or, for that matter, to intellectuals grappling with these ideas in other regions of India? Since Muslims were the majority of Bengali speaking people at this time, readers have no way of assessing the manner in which these constructions actually represented anything beyond the Hindu intelligentsia. Or if there were discursive and intellectual encounters that transcended the boundaries that Nabin Chandra Sen, Akshaykumar Maitreya, and Girishchandra Ghosh represented.

During the age of this nationalist thought-world, from the 1870s to the 1910s, many Muslim writers wrote in Bengali; like Mir Musharraf Hussein, who wrote novels, plays, and verse, in particular, the three-part *Bishad-Sindhu* (Ocean of Sorrows) about the Battle of Karbala, and Ismail Hossain Shiraji, who traveled to Turkey during the Balkan Wars, wrote travelogues about Turkey in Bengali as well as seditious anti-colonial literature. These writers were certainly also affected by the newly ascendant discourses of nation and community. Though not a particularly visible or remarkable part of the vernacular-educated Bengali middle-class literati, these writers also grappled with issues of sovereignty, in particular through idealized connections with the Islamic world as well as Islamic literary and ethical themes in Bengali that had been present in the language since at least the 17th century CE. Given that the Muslim portion of Siraj's identity was crucial for the stereotype of him as a tyrant, why not include any assessment of Muslim Bengali writing during the age of nationalist thought? Chatterjee mentions how by 1940, 'the Muslim public in Calcutta was being mobilized for entirely new political futures' (p. 323), but without any sense of the exclusions that were discursively operating in the thought-worlds of Bengali letters at the time. Inputting an awareness of the exclusions operating at discursive levels would allow readers a sense of the texture of how hegemonic ideas generate force and power. These questions reflect on the larger issue of how hegemony is understood in this work, for the broader audience of scholars of modern politics and political thought. Is hegemony always already given and does it not have a history? What happens to the contingent moments of the construction of the hegemonic ideas in the making of 'imperial practices'?

Near the end of the book, Chatterjee mentions a way of disaggregating the Indian nation by presenting a potential critique of its post-1947 career: 'there is no reason to believe that a postcolonial democracy such as India would not harbor ambitions of playing such an imperial role, just as democracies of the nineteenth century had done' (p. 344). Such a statement exposes the assumption that the making of Indian national ideas itself was free from such ambitions and only the post-1947 set of state practices requires such a disaggregation. Could one pursue the making of exclusions in India's own past – for example, the Bengali Hindu writers that he discusses, and the particularly upper-caste Hindu nationalist community that is created by them – through directly addressing areas of the Bengali and broader Indian landscape they systematically ignored?

Besides an assessment of the social realm in the making of discourse and an appreciation of discursive power, what also remains unaddressed is how a narrative like the Black Hole story of Calcutta is so powerful that it, and its career, should assume the burden of representing the 'the global phenomenon of modern empire from the eighteenth to the twentieth century' (p. xi). In order to demonstrate the power of the Black Hole story, Chatterjee uses the example of one third of 115 senior college students knowing about it and most (how many of the one third of 115 constituted the 'most' was not mentioned) believing it to be true. Does this exercise represent the extent of the power of this sort of ideology of empire that the Black Hole represents? Did the story resonate with colonized peoples and colonial officials elsewhere, as opposed to

New York college students in 1947? As Chatterjee mentions other types of imperial-modern forms, such as the settler colonial and the plantation types, do those types not require a discursive unpacking and examination, or are readers to assume that the ideological bases for their imperial practices are easily understood? In his laudable pulling of the curtain back from European political thought's hypocritical self-representations and false universalisms, Chatterjee potentially inserts a comparable blindness in his generalization of 'African and Asiatic' peoples as represented by the particular place of Calcutta and the various ways that Hindu elites in the modern age understood political power.

These questions aside, Chatterjee's work proves relevant to post-colonial scholars, political theorists and early modern historians, regardless of the region of specialization. His history is a discursive history of the modern world, a post-colonial counterpart to synthetic world histories that have appeared in recent years, such as C.A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* and Eric Hobsbawm's many 'Age of ...' books, particularly his *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*.⁽⁴⁾

In a manner that departs from these authors, he grapples with how imperial practices are imbricated in knowledge reproduction, much like Nicholas Dirks' *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*.⁽⁵⁾ He achieves this particularly successfully in his reading of how the Black Hole story changed in the 19th century from requiring a 'secret veil' to creating a justification for conquest. The consequent manners of appropriation of ideas of conquest in the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia are also, similarly, parsed out in excellent detail. Doubtlessly, specialists of other regions of the world which experienced discursive shifts in ideas of conquest will benefit from Chatterjee's approach. His work would be profitably read against Bayly, Marks, as well as contemporary theorists of global history, such as Bruce Mazlish and recent debates about the 'new global history' ⁽⁶⁾ in order to situate the role of empire in the history of modernity.

This work figures as a significant moment in Chatterjee's career as a distinguished scholar of politics, culture, and history. Author of groundbreaking contributions to political thought and history, such as the 1998 *Nation and its Fragments* ⁽⁷⁾, required reading for South Asian specialists of all stripes as well as post-colonial theorists, Chatterjee has managed to develop new positions outside of his earlier works through *The Black Hole*. For example, in his section on 'antiabsolutist early modern' politics, exemplified by Rammahon Roy, he offers a tour through many newly unearthed primary sources that have yet to be studied together and uncovers modes of learning and thought that were not shaped directly by colonial education. His spotlight on how pre-colonial debates about monotheism and religion emanated not from the encounter with the 'West,' but from internal Indian debates that included Muslim, Hindu, and Zoroastrian thinkers, warrants particular attention. This angle is a departure from his previous work, such as *Nationalist Thought and the Postcolonial World* ⁽⁸⁾ and *A Nation and its Fragments*, in which the late 19th-century figurations of nationalism in the latter and key archetypal modern Indian nationalist figures in the former were the objects of study. Here, Chatterjee transcends the focus only on the colonial encounter and manages to include a detailed analysis of intellectual debate in the Indian realm of letters before the rise of modern colonialism. This work, for South Asian specialists, may be read as a profitable successor to many of his earlier works about hegemony, culture, and colonial and post-colonial politics.

Chatterjee offers a wonderfully provocative ending to his book, about yet another *mythos*, that of the national, as opposed to the imperial, through the interpretation of how Curzon's plaque about the Black Hole had ended up in the Philatelic Museum. At least according to one of the museum's staff members, Subhas Chandra Bose, the great late colonial Bengali nationalist, wanted it removed and so hammered it loose from the wall. As Chatterjee states, 'the ground remains fertile for nationalist mythology' well after the formal careers of empires have come to a close. One wonders, though, whether such fertility is restricted to Indian nationalists, like Bose, and those with the privilege of identifying with and therefore debating the contours of an empire or nation. Or does it touch a wider swath of humanity across the spectrum of life touched by the rhetorical power of empire?

Notes

1. Swayze, Patrick and Lisa Niemi. *The Time of My Life* (New York, NY, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sandip Roy, 'An Incredible Hulking shame: The Avengers go to Calcutta' <
<http://newamericamedia.org/2012/05/if-the-avengers-is-right.php> [2]> [accessed 17 July 2012].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Ibid.*[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2004); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London, 1989); *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London, 1962); *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London, 1975).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Bruce Mazlish, *The New Global History* (New York, NY, 2006).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London, 1986).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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