A Gold Medal of the Time of the Mughal Emperor 'Ālamgīr II

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A round gold medal bearing a six-lined Persian inscription in *Nasta'līq* characters was purchased in London some year ago and now lies in a private collection. It is 3.8 centimetres in diameter and has a hook for suspension. The weight could not be ascertained, as the present writer received from the purchaser merely a photograph, not the actual object. On the obverse side, beside the inscription, it has a running pattern of herring bone design on the margin **(Fig.1)**. The reverse is plain **(Fig. 2)**. The medal refers to an important historical event and is therefore worth bringing it into the limelight. The text reads as follows:

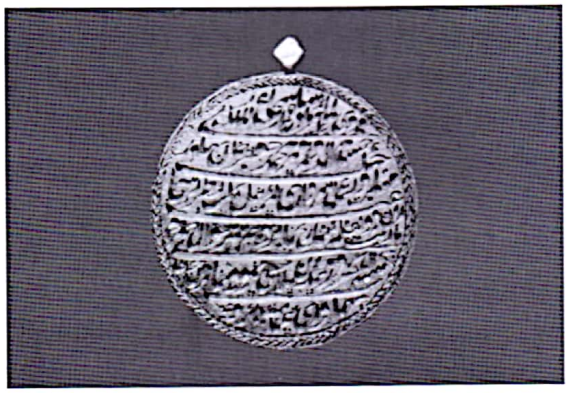

Fig.1

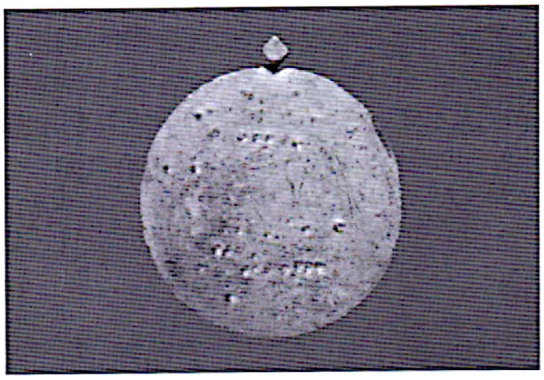

Fig.2

۱۔ فدوی عالمگیر بادشاہ غازی شجاع الملک

۲۔ جنگ حسام الدولہ میر محمد جعفر خان بہادر

۳۔ عہ مہابت در عمل سرداری یئر نیل کلپر نظر بر شجا

۴۔ ران ردیف لہ بتاریخ پانزدہم شہر شوال المکرّم ماریت

۵۔ سنہ ۱۱۷۰ ہجر در میدان پلاسی نمود بنابراں خطا

۶۔ بہادری عنایت مرد

Translation: Devoted servant of 'Ālamgīr (II), the ghāzī king (i.e. one who fights for his religion), (I), the most courageous in the country, the sword of the state, Mīr Muḥammad Ja'far, the brave Khān (i.e. Lord), the terror in war, in view of the courage, which he showed under the command of Col. Clair (correctly Clive) in the battlefield of Plassey, conferred the title (i.e. medal) of bravery on Ron Rudolf Marryat[1], on 15th Shawwāl al-Mukarram, 1170H[2] (Sunday, 3 July 1757).

The Elongated Letters

These letters serve as dividers. From top to bottom these are as follows:

1. The one separating line 1 from 2 is the last letter of the word غازی (Ghāzī) in line 1.
2. The next one dividing the lines 2 and 3 in the last word in the phrase بہادرجنگ (Bahādur Jang).
3. The one separating line 3 from 4 is the last syllable of the word شجاعت (shujā'at).
4. The next one dividing the lines 4 and 5 is the first letter of the word غازی (Ghāzī) in line 5.
5. The last in the series separating line 5 from 6 is the last letter of the word خطاب (Khaṭāb) in line 5.

Language and Orthography

The language is simple Persian, neatly engraved in *Nast'līq* style, with no serious grammatical error, which is often the case in such documents because of the low level of education among the craftworkers responsible for engraving. This may be seen in the incorrect rendering of European names. In the present case the craftworker and also perhaps the author responsible for writing the text, were both not sufficiently capable of rendering British names into Persian letters. This resulted in disfiguring personal names, which are hard to restore. The name Clive, for instance, is rendered as 'Clair' and Clive's designation or rank Colonel as 'Kīrnal'. Fortunately, both the words are known from history and therefore present no difficulty in their restoration. But the other proper name, the actual recipient of the medal, read here as Ron Rudolf Marryat is a difficult case. The name does not occur in historical accounts of Plassey known to the present writer, nor is its reconstruction absolutely free from problems. Rudolf is in fact written above the last letter (namely ت) of the name Marryat. But the letter ت, which needs only two dots, has two groups of dots each consisting of two dots. This suggests that one group of these dots belongs to the word written above, that is, Rudolf. But should we apply these dots to this word, it would be read as Radīf or Rawīf, not Rudolf, which so far as our knowledge of European nomenclature goes, would seem to be very unlikely. We shall therefore prefer the reading Rudolf and consider the additional dots as an error on the part of the engraver. The word Marryat is less problematic. The existence of a Marryat family in England may be evidenced in the name of Fredrick Marryat (1792-1848), a well known novelist and naval officer generally known as Captain Marryat.

Summary of Events Leading to the Battle of Plassey

The event referred to in the medal is well known battle between Sirāj ad-Dawlah, the Nawāb (or governor) of Bengal and Robert Clive of the East India Company, at the battlefield of Plassey about 20 miles below Murshidābād in Bengal. European writers consider this battle as harbinger of the British rule in South Asia. The following brief account of this battle is based on John Keay's *The Honourable Company* (Harper Collins Publishers London 1991: 310-318).

The insatiable appetite of European companies comprising mainly the Danish East India Company, the Swedish East India Company, the *Compagnie des Indes* (French) and the British East India Company, for gaining more and more trading rights from the Mughal administration and then jealously protecting these rights by building a series of forts in the coastal areas, which could be used not only against the rival companies but also against the Mughal governors of those areas is well known. As the companies were influenced by European politics, they brought European quarrels to South Asia and fought battles with each other. As long as Mughal authority lasted it acted as an effective check on their rivalries. But once it crumbled there was nothing to stop them. The companies dominated the seas and

fortified their settlements on the Indian coast spreading from Gujarat to Bengal. These forts later became hotbeds of intrigue, foul play and bribery.

The sack of Delhi first by Nādir Shāh Afshār of Irān (1739) and then by Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī of Afghanistan (1757), had shaken the Mughal empire to its roots. Revenues sharply dwindled while administration badly slackened. No emperor of the calibre of Bābar or Akbar was there to rescue the country rapidly heading towards disintegration. The emperors became tools in the hands of powerful nobles whose squabbles and intrigues to capture power encouraged provincial governors, particularly of the distant provinces to behave like independent rulers. Although they kept a show of allegiance to the Mughal emperor, it was superficial in essence and subject to the fulfilment of their own selfish ends. One of these was Sirāj ad-Dawlah who succeeded his father 'Alī Wardī Khān as governor of Bengal in 1756.

Perceiving the danger that the foreign companies could pose to the government, Sirāj ad-Dawlah resolved to take action against them. His first target was the British East India Company and its possessions in Bengal. Merely two months after his succession as *Nawāb* of Bengal in April 1756, he dispossessed William Watts of the Company's Kāsim bazaar establishment and two weeks after that he was master of Calcutta or Alinagar as he renamed it. The final storming of Fort William (Calcutta) occurred just before dusk on Sunday, 20 June, causing great panic among the defenders. According to John Zep'haniah Holwell, who was himself taken prisoner, out of the force of 170 individuals defending the fort, twenty five fell on that day. But his figures, as John Keay (1991: 304) remarks, are not reliable, least of all that of 146 for those taken prisoner and consigned for the night to a detention cell - the so-called Black Hole - a semi basement measuring about 18 feet by 15 with a raised sleeping area and barred windows on one side. Holwell, one of the twenty three survivors, later proved to be a brilliant publicist and crafted an account of this incident in a highly emotive language. This gave the hoax undue publicity.

To deal with the situation after the fall of Calcutta, Drake, Clive and Watson, who were there to protect Company's interests, formed a Select Committee, which in later years developed into the Foreign Department. Clive and Watson wrote to the *Nawāb* demanding restitution and compensation. When by Christmas 1756 they received no reply, they set out to take Calcutta back by force. It was known that Sirāj ad-Dawlah was back in Murshidābād and that his governor of 'Alinagar had taken up position in the Baj-baj fort, which commanded the Hughli river just below Calcutta. But Baj-baj was so poorly manned that on the approach of the Company's troops its garrison melted into the night. The *Nawāb*'s garrison at Baj-baj put up such a poor show that it led to the concoction of a story regarding a certain Strahan, who, under the influence of alcohol, is related to have conquered the fort single-handedly. Two days later the Company's troops began pounding Fort William. In less than an hour the Fort's guns fell silent. The British retook Calcutta as easily as they had lost it. As to whom belonged the honour of retaking the Fort, Captain Eyre Coote and Colonel Clive put up their separate claims.

Having settled the affairs of Calcutta, the East India Company declared war against Sirāj ad-Dawlah. Hostilities commenced immediately with an attack on the *Nawāb*'s port of Hughli, which was virtually sacked. In retaliation, Sirāj ad-Dawlah, on 3 February, despatched a force to retake Calcutta and encamped near Chitpur. Twenty four hours later Clive made a daring night attack leaving more than a thousand dead in the wake. It was not a big loss for the *Nawāb*, neither did Clive's action result in a victory. Meanwhile, another danger was heading towards Bengal from a different direction. Having

heard the news that Afghan troops of Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī were heading towards Bengal, Sirāj ad-Dawlah decided to pull his forces back to Murshidābād quickly agreeing to all the company's demands including the right to mint coins. This gave the Company an opportunity to deal with the French who were trying to increase their influence in Bengal.

The French presence in Bengal was always looked upon with jealousy by the British. The outbreak of the Seven Years War in Europe provided the right opportunity. Clive had already resolved to relieve the French of Chandernagar - the principal French settlement in Bengal. On 13 March Clive attacked the suburbs of Chandernagar and overran the entire territory. The morning of 23 March saw the most severe bombardment from the river side delivered by Watson's ships. When the fort finally capitulated, it meant the end of French prospects in Bengal. It also undermined the *Nawāb*'s position. Certainly the defeat of the French had had a profound psychological impact on the unhappy Sirāj. Henceforth fear of British displeasure dictated his moves.

Fearing that Watson's ships might set a course for Murshidabad another fifty miles inland, he began intercepting the shallow draught barges, which alone could use this part of the river and then blocked it in two places. At one of these places, some twenty miles below Murshidabad, he stationed a large part of his army. The place was known as Plassey.

Meanwhile (May 1757) news of an impending coup in the camp of Sirāj ad-Dawlah became widespread. The contention that the plot enjoyed popular support and was some kind of a Hindu protest against Muslim rule has no evidence to stand upon (Keay 1991: 316). No doubt, Bengal had been under Muslim rule for centuries, but the Hindus had established themselves at all levels of the administration. Moreover, there were several Bengali converts to Islam and the society in general presented an integrated picture. The rumours might have been spread by vested interests to demoralize the *Nawāb* and might have died out without doing any harm to him. But when they reached the ears of Clive he immediately grabbed the opportunity and by giving them substance, put them to the Company's advantage. This followed by a hectic schedule of under hand activities. A plot to dethrone Sirāj was prepared; agents were found out to put it into action; after various deceitful actions and the exchange of coded letters a treaty to be signed by Mīr Ja'far - the man finally selected as the substitute - was kept ready. The other significant secret agents included the Dīwān Rai Durlabh, a Bengali Hindu who belonged to the great banking family of the *Seṭhs*, originally Marwari Jain from Rājasthān, and Amīn Chand who is said to have been a Sikh but sounds more like a *jāṭ*.

By the end of May everything was ready, but there arose a complication regarding the share of Amīn Chand, the Company's chief Indian agent. He demanded five per cent of the *Nawāb*'s treasure. It was feared that, if the demand was not met, he would reveal all to Sirāj, if it was met, other conspirators would back out in disgust. Clive, very cleverly, found a way out. He prepared two versions of the treaty. One, on red paper included Chand's share as he demanded. The other, on white paper, did not. This is how the wretched Amin Chand was duped into believing that he would get his stipulated share. Eighty years later Thomas Babington Macaulay considered it 'as incontrovertible evidence of the blackest turpitude in the founder of our Indian empire (i.e. Clive)' (Keay 1991: 317).

On 13 June 3000 British soldiers headed for Murshidābād. In spite of the secret treaty Clive was still doubtful whether the conspirators would come to his help in the hour of need. He was more inclined to wait till joined by some country power. Then came a letter from Mīr Ja'far urging him on. On 22 June he crossed the river and on the following day he was face to face with Sirāj ad-Dawlah at Plassey. What

followed has been aptly described 'as more in the nature of a transaction than a battle' (Keay 1991: 317). The fighting began with a four-hour exchange of artillery. Clive was still full of doubts regarding the assistance, which he expected from his co-conspirator, and so also was Sirāj regarding the role of his commanders. Unfortunately, his most dependable general was killed in the earlier cannonade and he had to turn for advice to men like Mīr Ja'far who had already been purchased by Clive. All counselled a withdrawal to their fortified encampment. As a first move, therefore, the forward artillery was withdrawn from the depression it had been occupying. This was the first success of the treacherous elements in his army. Major Killpatrick, one of the commanders of Clive immediately swept forward to occupy the depression. A flanking movement could have severed Killpatrick's advance, but the *Nawāb*'s troops massed along the British flank proved to be friendly spectators under the command of Mīr Ja'far and other conspirators. Sirāj eventually fled for life. After a brief spell on the run he was overtaken and assassinated by MīrJa'far's son on 2 July (Keay 1991: 318). Clive entered Murshidabad in triumph and handed over the throne to Mīr Ja'far. This is how John Keay (1991 p. 319) sums up the story: 'Bengal was not won by fighting but by subterfuge. This triumph belonged to Clive but was a triumph of subversion not conquest. On the face of it Plassey had guaranteed the success of the conspiracy; in reality it was the conspiracy which guaranteed the success of Plassey. The ritual of battle merely legitimized the transfer of power.'

The rest is a horrible tale of loot, personal enrichment and plunder. While Clive and his colleagues amassed vast fortunes, Bengal was impoverished and sucked dry. Mīr Ja 'far tried his best to play the role assigned to him but the secret treaty he had signed turned out to be a real noose, which went on tightening round his neck every moment. Murshidābād treasure amounted merely to £1.5 million. How much of it was siphoned off may be anybody's guess. Against this Mīr Ja'far's liabilities in the form of compensation and presents promised to the English under the terms of the secret treaty came to over £2.5 million. Less than half of this was due to the Company as indemnity for the loss of Calcutta. The remainder was destined for private individuals - prize money to the army and navy, a handsome consideration for the Select Committee, individual presents for Clive, Watts, Watson etc and further sums for the Indian conspirators. To make the matters even more difficult for Mīr Ja'far, Clive arranged to purchase the sympathy of Rai Durlabh, the man in charge of the Murshidābād treasury. Mīr Ja'far seems to have assumed that by gratifying the Bengal Councillors he might expect a more lenient interpretation of his commitments. If so, he was sorely disillusioned[3]. He visited Calcutta twice, always a lucrative occasion for the hosts since, while the presents from the *Nawāb* went straight into their pockets, those to the *Nawāb* were charged to the Company. The medal discussed above seems to be one such present.

Notes

1. This name may also be read as رلف بارنت ران (Ron Rolf Bārnat). A certain Commodore Curtis Barnett was there in India in about the second quarter of the 18th century, but he is known to have died near Madras at the end of April 1746 (Keay 1991: 275).
2. There is some confusion regarding this date. The date of the battle of Plassey here mentioned is 15 Shawwāl 1170H, which is equal to Sunday 3 July 1757CE (Lahori 1994: 195), but the date mentioned in historical records is 22-23 June 1757. This shows a difference of ten days. It is likely that 15 Shawwāl is actually 5 (پنجم) Shawwāl. The letter 'J' is always pronounced as 'Z'

in Bengal. The figure *Panjam* (i.e. 5th) would therefore be pronounced in Bengal as *Panzam*. This may have led to the form *Pānzdaham* (i.e. 15th).

3. Mīr Ja'far was removed from the throne by the East India Company in 1760. His son-in-law Mīr Qāsim was installed in his place and removed in 1763.

Bibliography

Keay, John (1991) *The Honourable Company*, London: Harper Collins Publishers.
Lahori, Ziauddin (1994) *Jauhar-i Taqwīm* (Urdu), Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture