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Tipu Sultan in History: Revisionism Revised

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Narasingha Sil¹

Abstract

This historiographical essay seeks to chart a middle course between what may be called Tipu bashing and, to borrow an expression from Anne Buddle, “Tipu Mania,” with a view to providing a balanced view of Tipu Sultan the man and the statesman. This study is premised on the verdict of Joseph François Michaud who not only admires the Sultan’s courage and noble intentions but also laments his superstition, lack of discretion and farsight, apathy to deliberations, and counterproductive stubbornness that inevitably led to his undoing. Tipu’s tenacious conviction in the rectitude of his policies and measures deprived him of the sagacity to mend and amend them as and when necessary. The American gymnast and three-time Olympian Dominique Dawes observed that people do not plan to fail but respond to failure when it occurs by bouncing back and responding to it. Tipu Sultan’s misfortune was that he failed to learn from his failures.

Keywords

Seringapatam, Anglo-Mysore War, Haidar Ali, George Harris, Lord Wellesley

Introduction

Ever since the fall of Seringapatam¹ concluding the fourth and final Anglo-Mysore War (1799), in which Tipu Sultan Fath 'Ali Khan, the self-styled *Padshah* of Mysore (regnal [r.] 1782-1799), died, his character and career have been the centerpiece of a historiographical battle, that could be appropriately termed, *a la* Anne Buddle (1989), a veritable “Tipu Mania” (p. 53). As Azer Rahman (2003) observed in an article commemorating the 204 anniversary of Tipu’s death, “Tipu remains a controversial figure in history, drawing extensive reactions—he is either reviled or adored.” Tipu confronted the British East India Company (EIC) with adamant resolve and this audacity of a regional potentate of Mughal India has endeared his memory to posterity to whom he stands for a liberator of colonial India who could have been (Ali, 1999).² Reacting to the general assessment of British writers (who were mostly military personnel) as producers of imperialist narratives designed to denigrate an adversary from the orient, historical studies on Tipu Sultan by Indian (and a few Western) scholars posit a positive profile of the man as an enterprising, enlightened, and eclectic regional chief whose struggle for freedom from foreign control was brutally crushed by a superior military imperialist power.

Typical examples of this revisionist historiography are comments such as Tipu was a patriot noted for his “love of land and love of liberty” (Ali, 1999) or Tipu offered his blood to write the “history of India” (Subhan, 2002, p. 41), or Tipu was a “modernising technocrat” who beat the West “at their

own game,” and was “something of a connoisseur, with a library of about 2000 volumes in several languages” (Dalrymple, 2005). This sort of revisionism in respect of the character and conduct of Tipu Sultan marked the *corpus* of a number of Indian historians in 1999, the year commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of his death (Habib, 1999; Ray, 2002). Even to this day, Tipu continues to provoke controversy among specialists as well as lay readership at large. This article addresses this controversy by revisiting, for the first time, some significant contemporary Western sources and their powerful postcolonial critiques with a view to bringing the authentic man and statesman out of the halo that surrounds his personality and performance as a major regional potentate of early colonial India. Consequently, Tipu Sultan emerges from his hallowed historiography as an ambitious, courageous, albeit headstrong, impetuous, and short-sighted autocrat who lacked the sagacity to mend and amend his policies and measures and thus brought about his own downfall.

Tipu Sultan: The Tiger of Mysore

Tipu’s encounter with the foreigners reveals that he was not against their presence in his domain; he actually wanted

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them to comply with his commands, however capricious or contemptuous. 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. Tipu 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

Tipu'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 Tipu 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 (*khudadad sarkar*) 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 Tipu's Mysore as "the most simple and despotic monarchy in the world" (Glieg, 1830, pp. 1, 84). Tipu 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 Tipu's wanton cruelty. Major Alexander Allan (1764-1820) reports on Tipu'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 [Tipu] 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).

Tipu 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, Tipu'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, Tipu 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 Tipu, 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)

Tipu's Islamic Consciousness and Conscience

Tipu Sultan and his father were no real "sons of the soil" (*manninamaga*)⁵ of Mysore as they hailed from a migrant Arab tribe (Quraish). Tipu's father Haidar Ali was a soldier of fortune who acquired this predominantly Hindu territory

from its pusillanimous Hindu ruler.⁶ Thus, the Sultan sought to legitimize, or at least to assert, his imperium over Mysore, of which he was but the inheritor of a de facto mantle. He procured a *sanad* [patent of grant] from the Mughal Emperor and received the title of “Pillar of the Empire . . . devoted of Shah Alam Padshah Ghazi.” In 1782, Tipu dispatched an embassy to Constantinople seeking confirmation of his title to the throne of Mysore from the Sultan of Turkey. His overtures followed a well-established tradition (Brittlebank, 1997; Guha, 2001). However, Iqbal Husain, the translator of the Sultan’s various *hukmnamas* (ordinances and instructions) for his emissaries to Istanbul and Paris, finds no direct reference to Tipu’s search for legitimacy. For example, Husain finds no reference to Tipu’s addressing the *Khondkar* (Sultan) of Rum [Turkey] as “Khalifa,” but notes the Sultan’s addressing the *Khondkar* as *Padshah-i-Ahl-i Islam* [“King of Muslims”] (I. Husain, 2001, p. 20).

Although Husain’s point is well-taken, Tipu’s plea to the “King of Muslims” to empower the “True Religion” makes it clear that he sought the support of Turkey, an ally of the English and an adversary of the French, as the liberator of the Muslims and thereby made himself a co-jihadist ruler (I. Husain, 2001, pp. 40-42). It is noteworthy that Tipu’s sovereign consciousness itself was ultimately connected with religion intimately. He issued coins that at once proclaimed the primacy of Islam and the independence of the Sultan by omitting the required reference to the imperial Mughals.⁷ Tipu even had the *khutba* (sermon in the mosque) read in his name (omitting that of the Emperor) as *sultan-i-din* (“prince of the faith”) dedicated to upholding “the honour and interest of Islam . . . and . . . its increase and diffusion” (Kirkpatrick, 1811, Letter # 331). Mir Hussein Kirmani (1980) points out that “the Sultan had a great aversion to . . . Hindus and other tribes,” built a mosque in every town, and appointed a *muezzin*, a *moula*, and a *kazi* to each (pp. 154-155). Tipu urged his army commander in Calicut on December 14, 1788:

I am sending two of my followers with Mir Hussain Ali. Along with them you should capture and kill all Hindus. Those below 20 years may be kept in prison and 5000 from the rest should be killed by hanging from tree tops. These are my orders.

Two years later, he boasted his conquest of Calicut in a missive to Syed Abdul Dulai:

With the grace of Prophet Mohammad and Allah, almost all Hindus in Calicut are converted to Islam. Only on the borders of Cochin State a few are still not converted. I am determined to convert them also very soon. I consider this as “Jihad” to achieve that object. (cited in Sharma, 1991, pp. 111-112)

In his letter of February 10, 1799, to the Grand Seignior of Constantinople Tipu claimed that “near five hundred thousand of the infidels of the district of Calicut, Nuzzuraband, Zufferabaud, and Ashrufabaud . . . have been converted at

different times” (Martin, 1837, p. 30). In a military manual titled *Fat’hul Mujahidin* (*Victory of the Holy Warrior*), he also declared a “Holy War . . . against the English,” who were alleged to have “converted many Muslims . . . [and] enslaved many Muslim women and children . . . [and] destroyed Muslim mosques and tombs to build their idol-houses [churches] thereon” (Habib, 1999, p. xxv).

Admittedly, Tipu appointed Hindus to positions of trust and responsibility as indeed did the Mughals and other regional Muslim rulers. It is, however, doubtful that appointment of Hindus to responsible posts followed any principle other than sheer common sense (Sharma, 1991). All Hindu appointees were highly qualified and though all of them were not impeccable and some outright corrupt, as Francis Buchanan (1762-1829) found out, getting rid of the bad apples “was impossible, for no other persons in the country had any knowledge of business” (Buchanan, 1999, p. 167). However, Tipu appointed even illiterate Muslims as *Asophs* [Lord Lieutenants] who were “entirely sunk in indolence, voluptuousness, and ignorance” (Buchanan, 1999, p. 167).

It is on record that the Sultan addressed the head of the Sringeri Math, Swami Sachchidananda Bharati, as *Jagadguru* (“World Teacher”; Saletore, 1999, p. 127) and, according to an eyewitness account, “went barefoot to [the] . . . Math to receive the Swamy’s blessings and to ask him to pass on a letter to the Marathas requesting them to take his side than that of the British” (Subhan, 2002, p. 43). Tipu patronized the temples of Sri Gandeswara and Sri Ranganatha. Subbaraya Chetty (1999) cites a list of grants from the Sultan to the Hindu temples and priests. Tipu’s attempt at forced conversion leading to the alleged suicide of 3,000 Brahmins to escape it, as noted by a Sanskrit scholar of Calcutta University, has been dismissed as unfounded by a scholar-politician (Pande, ca. 1996).

Tipu’s correspondences with the Guru of Sringeri Math reveal his scare for the foreboding of doom that he tried desperately to counter (Sharma, 1991). A firm believer in astrology, he often resorted to religious rituals and wore apotropaic objects and trinkets—Hindu as well as Islamic—either to avert a disaster or to attain success in his undertakings. A near contemporary historical account describes how, on May 4, 1799, the day Tipu died in the battlefield, he had ordered

for *all the ceremonies* prescribed by the Brahmins to be duly performed, and having given them several presents, requested their prayers for the prosperity of his government. He also ordered to be slaughtered two elephants with all their golden trappings; . . . and large sums of gold mohurs were distributed amongst the beggars. (Maistre De La Touche & Mohammad, 1855, p. 307, italics in original)

The reporter of this ritual wonders if it were inspired by the Sultan’s fear and superstition in the face of the besieging British army.

In fact, he already appears to have developed a defeatist mentality of a doomed man several months before the siege of Srirangapatnam. Lieutenant Wilks writes of the Sultan's apprehension of an impending dissolution of his empire based on a folk tale of cephalomancy he sincerely believed. According to this tale, the mysterious power of a crushed human skull showing some cracks caused the death of 40 persons. When Tipu noticed some cracks on the mast of the ship the Frenchman Ripaud had taken to the Isle of France, he was convinced that these cracks foreboded the destruction of his empire and thus "he readily made up his mind to throw himself unconditionally in his Lordship's [Wellesley's] compassion" after he had read the Governor General's letter of January 9, 1799 (Wilks, 1810-1817/1869, Vol. 2, pp. 332-333).⁸

The Sultan sported a gold ring etched with the name of the Hindu God Rama—a gift from the Guru of the Sringeri Math (Olikara, 2012). Tipu and Haidar's portraits in full regalia hang on the walls of a Hindu temple of Lord Narasimha at Sibi near the city of Bangalore, which was patronized by the Sultan. These "vibrant paintings" as well as "a frieze of marching soldiers escorting Tipu on his elephant" inside the temple are evidence more of Hindu eclecticism and tolerance or of the Muslim rulers' power and authority over their subjects both Hindu and Muslim than of genuine spiritual or religious convictions on the part of both rulers (Brittlebank, 1997, pp. 152-153). Indeed, as Denys Forrest (1970) has observed,

The easy thing is to accept him as a straightforward persecuting bigot . . . He certainly followed the routines of piety, with much reading of the Koran, punctilious ritual ablutions, texts in his turban and the name of God ready to his lips and pen. But he was also intensely superstitious, with an obviously higher opinion of astrologers than of *maulavis*. The seven stars rather than the hand of Allah seem to rule his universe, and it is significant that he paid tremendous attention to the interpretation of dreams. (p. 212)⁹

Tipu destroyed at least three Hindu temples: the Harihareswara temple at Harihar, the Varahaswami temple at Srirangapatnam, and the Odakaraya temple at Hospet. In the Tamil land and in Malabar, he earned the sobriquet of "a Brahman-killer and a despoiler of south Indian temples" (Brittlebank, 1997, pp. 125-126; see also Logan, 1887/2000, p. 449). His forced conversion, circumcision, and merciless massacre of the Hindus and Christians in Malabar have been graphically described by the Portuguese traveler Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo (1748-1806; Bartolomeo, 1800). Roderick Mackenzie (1793) commented on Tipu's march to Trinomaly and his mayhem there in 1790:

Here neither respect, for the grandeur and antiquity of their temples, nor veneration for the sacred rites of a religion whose origin no time records, proved any protection for the persons or property, even of the first Brahmins. Their pagodas, breached with sacrilegious cannon, were forcibly entered, their altars

defiled, their valuables seized, their dwellings reduced to ashes, and the devastation was rendered still more horrible by the scattered remains of men, women and children, mangled beneath a murderous sword. (Vol. 1, p. 203)

Admittedly, as Richard Eaton (2000) observes, Hindu temples had been sites for the contestation of royal authority well before the advent of the Muslims in India and thus Tipu's desecration as well as endowment of Hindu temples followed the pattern of Mughal conduct for purely political (and not religious or iconoclastic) reasons (cited in Panikkar, 2000). Even though it has been observed by Major Dirom (1794) that Tipu Sultan's "cruelties were, in general, inflicted only on those whom he considered his enemies," one cannot condone or overlook his penchant for sheer gratuitous blood-letting (p. 250). He does come across as a religious zealot in his command to Mir Zainul Abidin Shustari, *sipahdar* [commander] of a *kushoon* [brigade], ordering him to punish the inhabitants of Coorg, guilty of committing "excesses" at Zufferabad, by murdering or imprisoning them and then "*both the slain and the prisoners . . . to be made Musulmans [that is, circumcised]*" (Kirkpatrick, 1811, Letter # 117, italics in original).

Tipu Sultan's ceremonial sword bears an unabashed admission inscribed on it: "My victorious sabre is lightning for the destruction of the unbelievers." He publicly claimed himself to be a descendant of Muhammad and his avowed aim was "to restore the religion of that prophet by destroying or proselytizing all heathens and infidels." At the center of his personal seal that validated all his public dispatches the Arabic inscription reads: "I am the messenger of the true faith;" around the edge of the seal a couplet in Persian reads: "From conquest, and the protection of the Royal Hyder, comes my title of Sultan; and the world, as under the sun and moon, subject to my signet" (Dirom, 1794, p. 251). His own writings (*Sultan-ut-Tawarikh* and *Tarikh-I-Khudadadi*) speak eloquently of his religious fanaticism (Sharma, 1991, p. 109, inscription on Tipu's sword cited on p. 118). He even dreamed of either converting or conquering the infidel (M. Husain, 1957, 64 # 13, p. 67 # 17).¹⁰ As a contemporary estimate has it,

a dark and intolerant bigotry excluded from Tippoo's choice all but the true believers; and unlimited persecution united in detestation of his rule every Hindoo in his dominions. In the Hindoos no degree of merit was a passport to favour; in the Mussulman no crime could ensure displeasure. (Wilks, 1810-1817/1869, Vol. 2, p. 383)

Tipu thankfully acknowledged in his letter of February 16, 1799, to the Grand Seignior of Constantinople for the latter's desire,

for the sake of the whole body of the faith and religious brotherhood, to afford assistance to our Brethren Mussulmans; support our holy theology and not withhold my [Tipu's] power

and endeavours in defending the region of Hindustan from the machinations and evils of these enemies [the English and the French Christians]. (Kausar, 1980, p. 268)

He invited Zaman Shah to attack the Mughal capital of Delhi because the Emperor Shah Alam had “reduced the faith to . . . weakness” (he had become a pensioner of the powerful Maratha leader of Gwalior, Mahadji Shinde, ca. 1730-1794) and the letter of invitation concluded with a report how

near a hundred thousand followers of the faith, nay more, assembled every Friday, the *Sabbath* of the Mussulmans, in the two mosques of the capital, better known as the Aulah and the Asqa mosques, and after the prescribed form of prayers, supplicate the Bestower of all things according to the words of the Scripture, “Grant thy aid, O God! To those who aid the religion of Muhammad; and let us be of that number; Destroy those, O God! Who would destroy the religion of Muhammad; and let not us be their number”. (Kausar, 1980, 141-142)

More (2003) observes that Tipu was suspicious of the Indian Christians, and he did not tolerate the presence of European missionaries in his territory, though he tolerated the Syrian Christians.

In one sense, the Sultan’s practice of converting convicts or rebels into Islam as an instance of their humiliation and punishment does not seem to be an example of his religious fanaticism, for apparently he considered conversion into Islam to be an instrument of punishment for the rebels—something odious rather than a channel for their spiritual upliftment and welfare.¹¹ He clearly was not an evangelical Muslim but appeared to be a dispenser of punishment by forcing his own religion on the unworthy subjects thereby, ironically, debasing its own merits.

Postcolonial Revisionism of Tipu’s Representation in Colonial Texts

The reassessment of Tipu Sultan’s character and career since 1999 has produced a new mythology by postcolonial-postmodernist scholarship in place of what it regards as imperialist-colonialist demonology in which he is portrayed as an oriental despot with a diabolical design of oppressing his people and subverting the Company’s prospect in India. Postcolonial scholarship reinforced by postmodernist distrust of grand narratives or hegemonic discourse questions such interpretations depicting Tipu in a negative light. We now have a counter hegemonic discourse in place of the imperialist metahistory and consequently Tipu Sultan appears as a fallen nationalist leader whose vision of a modern industrialist and enlightened free India failed to materialize because of the grand alliance forged by the EIC with Mysore’s inimical neighbors, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Maratha Confederacy of west central Mughal India.

Some scholars even argued that the British paranoia of the monarch of Mysore was caused by their fear of an adversary who challenged the West by mastering the secrets of Western science and technology, thus meeting the Western power on its own terms.¹² One scholar posits that “the real threat represented by Tipu resulted from his blurring of distinction between East and West in his appropriation of European ideas, tactics and individuals” (Teltscher, 1995, p. 238).

A number of studies since the 1980s and 1990s debunk all reports of Tipu’s maltreatment and forcible conversion of war prisoners by the EIC’s military officers as downright propaganda by a bunch of “fighters as writers” (Colley, 2000, p. 277). Historical accounts by Mark Wilks (1759-1831); Alexander Beatson (1759-1830); Francis Buchanan (1762-1829); Lewin Bowring (1825-1910); William Fullerton, Roderick Mackenzie, and Henry Oakes (1756-1827); James Scurry (died 1822); or James Bristowe (born 1737) have been dismissed by a scholar and their works are “constructed around the figure of the oriental despot” (Teltscher, 1995, p. 233). It is, however, known that Colonel Wilks of the Madras army at Fort St. George is admired for his *Historical Sketches*, a work based on his access to state records, especially those of Fort St. George, and on his personal firsthand knowledge of the official records of Mysore that had been taken from Srirangapatnam to Calcutta after its fall.

Kate Teltscher (1995) considers Kirkpatrick’s translation of the Sultan’s letters as unreliable, especially because “he describes Tipu’s epistolary self-portrait in terms drawn largely from the vocabulary of despotism: the cruel enemy, intolerant fanatic, oppressive ruler, harsh master, the sanguinary and perfidious tyrant” (p. 235). There may be a kernel of truth in this allegation. He was quite open about his feelings about the Sultan even to the extent of opposing his brother James Achilles (1764-1805), who considered Tipu a brave soldier (Dalrymple, 2002). Nevertheless, the Kirkpatrick brothers were experts in Persian. William’s translation of Tipu’s letters is credible enough as the man was quite picky about his job. One just has to go through the preface to his *Select Letters of Tippoo Sultan* (Kirkpatrick, 1811, pp. ix-xxv) to note his scheme of translation, his hermeneutical methods, and his scholarly introspection and circumspection in respect of his literary enterprise. As he avers,

My principal object, in this work, being to present as striking a likeness of Tippoo, as the nature of materials, and the extent of my ability to employ them advantageously, would admit, I thought it essential to this end, to render his sentiments, on all occasions, as closely as the different idioms of the two languages [Persian and English] would allow, without involving the same in difficulty or obscurity. (Kirkpatrick, 1811, p. xi)

Thus, despite Kirkpatrick’s disparaging epithets for Tipu, his translation of the Sultan’s letters is unlikely to be doctored to vent his personal dislike of their author.¹³

Nevertheless, Teltscher (1995) notes that he “endeavours to guide the reader’s response quite openly” and concludes, “Tipu’s letters are thus *framed to conform* to expectations of despotism, even as they are offered as firsthand evidence of the sultan’s character” (p. 237, italics added). Interestingly enough, Teltscher credits the account of Lieutenant Edward Moor (1774) because he mocks at Tipu’s detractors for their “confined prejudices of contracted minds.” But she overlooks Moor’s observations that Tipu was not a “good man,” that his state of Mysore was “unlimitedly monarchical,” that his “mandate is the law” that was used to execute convicts in the most sanguinary manner, and that Tipu might have suffered from qualms of guilt for his cruel excesses (cited in Rao, 1948, Vol. 3, pp. 1228-1229).

Amal Chatterjee’s (1998) postcolonial analysis of the creation of 18th-century India in colonial imagination posits that Tipu Sultan “was at once the bogeyman, the proof that Indian rulers were duplicitous tyrants and proof that . . . any powerful Indian ruler was ultimately an evil despot” (p. 173). Chatterjee also lumps together all accounts of the experiences of Tipu’s British captives as intentional, overexaggerated, and even imaginary tales of terror. In his estimation, “British audiences were fed on a diet of ‘reports’ of Tipu’s depraved nature” (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 179). The eyewitness accounts of Tipu’s treatment of his prisoners are conflated with fictional tales about him to substantiate the final conclusion:

It is clear that both the chroniclers and the novelists felt obliged to “prove” that there was falsity . . . in the heart of the most famous of Indian monarchs . . . Memories were selective and convenient serving the end of proving that in the final reckoning British rule was the only stable, and therefore the preferable, mode of government of otherwise unstable Indians. (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 194)

Teltscher and Chatterjee’s critique anticipates Ruchira Banerjee’s (2001) analysis of *Remarks and Occurrences of Mr. Henry Becher* (1793). Banerjee (2001) questions the author Becher’s credibility because of his inability to be impressed by the opulence of Seringapatam, “his delight at the English army breaking into the palace grounds at Lal Bagh,” and his work being “part of a well-planned strategy to denigrate the Mysorean rulers to rationalize the enormously expensive Anglo-Mysore wars in India” (pp. 206-208). In a footnote, Banerjee lumps the works of Beatson (1800), Scurry, and Oakes together as the products of propaganda in favor of a war against Tipu Sultan. Becher’s work highlights Sultan’s cruelty, but, in Banerjee’s judgment, the Englishman appears to be even more despicable when he concludes his *Remarks* with a wish that “the left arm and foot of Tippoo . . . will be cut off by the English” (Banerjee, 2001, p. 212).¹⁴

Postcolonial Hermeneutic of Tipu’s Visual Representation

A postcolonial critique of the historiography of the Anglo-Mysore Wars has come from the perspective of pictorial representation of Tipu Sultan. Constance McPhee, Linda Colley, and Janaki Nair have sought to discover the distortion of the East in colonial paintings and at the same time the influence of the Indian paintings on the metropolitan portraiture. McPhee analyzes the American painter Mather Brown’s (1761-1831) two paintings, *The Departure of the Sons of Tippoo From the Zenana* (1792) and *Thomas Earl of Surrey, Defending His Allegiance to Richard III After the Battle of Bosworth Field, 1485* (1798) that she believes vilify Tipu Sultan. The first piece depicts Lord Cornwallis taking custody of the Sultan’s two young sons as hostage following the British victory in the Third Mysore War. The figure of Tipu Sultan, the provider of the hostages, resembles the well-known representation of the Yorkist King Richard III (1483-1485), the alleged murderer of his two young nephews, sons of Richard’s royal brother King Edward IV (1461-1483). Brown’s (1798) painting shows the earl of Surrey being stripped off his honor by the victor of Bosworth, the Tudor King Henry VII (1485-1509). Here Henry Tudor, the “usurper” [arguably, the Tudors had a weaker claim to the English throne than their dynastic rival the Yorkists], is shown in Tipu Sultan’s habits—turban and pointed shoes (*nagra*)—to highlight his villainy. This anti-Tudor painting was commissioned from Brown by the Yorkist partisan, the earl of Surrey’s 18th-century successor, Charles Howard, the 11th duke of Norfolk (McPhee, 1998).

What is intriguing about Brown’s paintings is that Tipu the colonial villain is associated with two putative villains from the British history, Richard the Crookback (Richard III’s nickname popularized by William Shakespeare), child killer, and Henry VII, the usurper. Thus, far from being a savage from a distant culture, Tipu was a familiar devil and one the British public could identify with. If such an interpretation has any merit, then it must be conceded that Mather Brown did not actually demean Tipu but in fact made him a mirror in which the painter’s compatriots could recognize their own villains.

Janaki Nair’s article carries on the postcolonial blame game and thus suffers from a logical asymmetry in its comparative analysis of the pictorial representations of Tipu Sultan and his British adversaries by the colonial and imperial painters. Admittedly, Dr. Nair is a scholar with an intimate knowledge of the artistic representation of the colonial as well as the Deccani painters. She, however, finds the idealized images of the British subjects by their artists who produced paintings on the Anglo-Mysore confrontation as historically dubious and valorizes the murals of Tipu Sultan’s summer palace *Dariya Daulat* in Srirangapatam depicting

his victorious battles against the British, as historically credible by pronouncing the Indian purposive idealization as “informal realism” (Nair, 2006, p. 113).

Linda Colley detects an intentional representation of Indian machismo on the murals of Tipu’s summer palace. In this painting commemorating the Battle of Pollilur (1780) between the forces of Haidar Ali and the British, the former’s son Tipu’s victorious army of mustachioed and bearded men appear in marked contrast to the White captives with “doe-like eyes, raised eyebrows, and pretty pink lips . . . painted to look like girls, or at least creatures who are not fully male” (Colley, 2000, pp. 269-270).

Doe eyes in India are universally considered as a mark of beauty for males and females alike. Even Tipu’s portrait by an anonymous Indian artist (1796-1799) shows him as a plump prince with “doe eyes” (see Dhar, 1799/1979, p. 118; Michaud, 1801-1809/1985, p. 151; Nolan, ca. 1859, p. 479). Dr. Colley’s imaginative interpretation of Tipu’s corpse as an intentional denigration of a dreaded foe following his death is baseless. The reference to “sexual excesses” and their mark on his corpse might have been the personal judgment of that senior Scottish army officer who described it, but it would take a quantum leap of imagination to infer an intentionality or agenda behind the description. Then, according to the formulaic style of Indian iconography, men without facial hair are not represented as sissy or effeminate by the Indian artists or so regarded by lay people. In fact all gods, especially the most popular folk gods, possess a clear face. However, the *asuras* (demigods or titans) or the *danavas* (demons) are represented by fearsome faces bearing oversize mustaches. Indians in general regard the fair-skinned Europeans—male as well as female—as intrinsically pretty or handsome. Thus, the representation of the British captives on the murals of Tipu’s summer retreat was not intended to depict them as effeminate but represent them in their true “colors.” Dr. Colley’s postcolonialist-nationalist ventriloquism¹⁵ is explicit when her hermeneutic is placed in cross-cultural contexts and perspectives. For example, how does one interpret the classical Greek or the Renaissance paintings and sculptures depicting naked muscular males with tiny limp genitals? Purposive representations of oversize adult males possessing undersize organs? What to make of the Hindu Folk God Krishna who is iconographically represented as a pretty boy but whose virility, as described in scriptural and literary texts, scores over the exploits of the Greek titan Herakles.

Colley also appears to be inadvertently impervious to the pain, suffering, and humiliation of the British captives by emphasizing their representation as “chinless wonders and/or mindless action men” (even though she has a qualifier) or commenting on their diaries and chronicles as “writing . . . something that British officers were increasingly expected to do as part of their job” (note the use of confusing passive voice to cover up an imaginary generalization) or characterizing their writing as “partly a function of growing military

professionalism” (as if professionalism is a marker of unreliability! Colley, 2000, pp. 278-280). She has no comments on their actual suffering because she sees all their accounts as “texts” or something that needs to be analyzed before reacting to. Lamentably enough, she even regards the accounts of the Sultan’s savage practice of forced circumcision of unsuspecting men of a different faith as a “dramatic” example of “experimenting with British styles of military drill” (whatever that means; Colley, 2000, p. 287). Clearly, the postcolonial-postmodernist critique of Tipu’s historicity, in spite of its attempt to go beyond (or beneath) the conventional historians’ interest in “the surface of reality” and make a surgical “cut into reality,” has in fact committed an overkill (Benjamin, 1968). Consequently, while the defects of the old colonial historiography remain to be adequately discovered or dispelled, a new *mythos* now surrounds the life and struggle of Tipu Sultan. Admittedly, as Chandrashekar (1999) has judiciously observed,

Any attempt to analyse leaders like Tipu is fraught with subjectivity. Tendencies to look at them as angel of virtue or wickedness personified could be discerned in such attempts. Such personalities could be analysed properly by pitting them in their historical context, in space and time . . . To treat him as a “freedom fighter,” as we understand freedom today, is like describing all those who fought against “foreigners” as freedom fighters and it could be endless . . . Simply the concepts such as nationalism, secularism and socialism were not available in the situation. It is too much to argue that Tipu was an embodiment of Indian nationalism.

However, we need to bear in mind that Tipu was fighting against a superior military power of an imperialist country determined to expand its sway in India. The Battle of Plassey (1757) delivered the prosperous region of Bengal into the Company’s hands. The Home government’s interest in these adventures was aroused by its plan to appropriate some of the EIC’s gains for its own budgetary needs. As the EIC began generating debts as well as revenues in the 1770s, the British government insinuated itself into the Company’s administration and thus managing the Indian affairs. Territorial acquisition by the Company with increasing governmental involvement was an integral part of this process (see Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Fisher, 1993/1996). A few months after the fall of Srirangapatnam, Governor General Wellesly wrote his superior, Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control (1793-1801),

If you will have a little patience, the death of the Nizam will probably enable me to gratify your *voracious appetite for lands and fortresses*. Seringapatam ought, I think, to stay your stomach awhile; not to mention Tanjore and the Poligar countries. Perhaps, I may be able to give you a supper of Oudh and the Carnatic, if you should still be hungry. (cited in Forrest, 1970, p. 310, italics in original)

As to Tipu's toy—the mechanical tiger and its British victim—Dr. Colley (2000) writes,

But Tipu, in the British imagination, . . . was also—as his own court rituals and chosen symbolism proclaimed—a tiger prince, the personification of all that seemed to the British dangerous and unpredictable about India. And it was partly as a tiger, “tearing in pieces the helpless victim of his craft, of his rapacity, that British propagandists now began describing him.” (p. 296)

Are we to believe “the tiger Tipu” terrorized “the British lion?” Ever since the Norman invasion lion, the king of the beasts, has been the symbol of Britain, the land of a powerful race. Tigers and lions could be conflated or confused in Urdu or Persian—*sher* or *asad*, but in English, the two feline species are distinct and hierarchically understood.¹⁶ Most probably, the British interest in and curiosity for the mechanical toy from Srirangapatnam were inspired by the highly publicized accident involving the death of Hugh, son of Sir Hector Monroe, on December 22, 1792, from the attack of a Royal Bengal tiger while on a hunting expedition on Sagar Island close to the Sunderbans, some 80 miles south of Calcutta. This gruesome episode captured the imagination of the British public, and the death scene was depicted in Staffordshire pottery in 1820. The scene was also popularized in the paintings of Joseph Crawhall (1861-1913).¹⁷ And if one is inclined to see symbols in everything, then it would not be unreasonable to interpret the British interest in Tipu's tiger as that of a hunter for its prey. It could also very well be that the toy actually represents Tipu's fantasy—his ardent desire to see the Company prostrate under the claw of Tipu, the tiger of Mysore.

Conclusion

The hubbub over the Indian national television (Doordarshan) serial “The Sword of Tipu Sultan” (1989) based on a colorful characterization of the man by a popular fiction writer Bhagwan Gidwani demonstrates the curious interplay of communal politics and academic polemics. The television docudrama presented Tipu 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 *Tipu Sultan: Villain or Hero?* edited by Sita Ram Goel (1995).¹⁹ The authors of this collection agreed that Tipu 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).

Tipu Sultan was no nationalist freedom fighter, the novelist Gidwani's sentimental description of Sultan notwithstanding. Admittedly, Tipu 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 Tipu 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 Tipu Sultan. If it is fair to maintain that Tipu 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 Tipu, 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.

Michaud (1801-1809/1985), who was never a denouncer of the Sultan, observed nevertheless that “the more he encountered obstacles . . . the more irascible became his temper, and . . . to conquer these difficulties, he had very often recourse to acts of tyranny” (p. 151). Michaud commented further that Tipu's

pride was only a childish vanity, and his ambition came near to delirium . . . He belonged to that small group of persons who could never put up with reverses, and who in adversity would not fall much lower than in their good fortune. (Michaud, 1801-1809/1985, p. 151)

Tipu'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. Michaud (1801-1809/1985) estimates that

the expenses he incurred to satisfy his hobby for new inventions together with the sum of 3,300,000 pound sterling which he paid to the allies according to the treaty of 1792 had contributed not a little to diminish the wealth of Seringapatam. (p. 156)

Tipu'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. As Jadunath Sarkar observed,

Wellesley killed a Tiger of Seringapatam whose claws had been cut and fangs extracted seven years before, a dazed and drooping chieftain with obscured vision and lost initiative, a mere shadow of the military genius, whose strategy in 1790-92

had excited the admiration of his English antagonists. (cited in Rao, 1948, p. 1027)

Yet, we must recognize with the benefit of hindsight the crucial role Tipu Sultan played in the history of English imperialism in the subcontinent. He proved himself to be a worthy adversary who for a short period of time made his formidable presence felt in the declining decades of Mughal India. Indeed, Munro made a disarmingly candid admission that Tipu Sultan “possessed an energy of character unknown to eastern princes” (cited in Mithal, 1998). I can do no better than conclude this essay with Denys Forrest (1970), Tipu’s elegant biographer, who observed that the Sultan

had a rare quality of singlemindedness . . . That is why the English feared him, even beyond reason. And he was a brave man. He may have fallen short in wisdom and farsight, but never in courage, never in aspiration, never in his dream of a united, an independent, a prosperous Mysore. (p. 337)

But he could not have aspired to a prosperous and independent *India*, as he was aware only of his own *patria*, Mysore and its dependencies, not of a larger political entity called *Hindustan* (though he was certainly aware of its spatial identity)²¹—much like the *patriots* of Renaissance Tuscany, Lombardy, or Venetia who had no concept of Italy but who passionately loved their individual principalities, republics, or *signoria*, nonetheless.

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Notes

1. Srirangapatnam is variously spelt as Srirangapatan, Srirangapatam, Seringapatam, Seringapatan, or Srirangapatnam. I use *Seringapatam*, the preferred conventional choice, while retaining the orthography as found in the quoted passages.
2. Tipu Sultan was the son of Haidar Ali, *Dalwai* [de facto ruler] of Mysore, and Fatima (Fakhr-in-Nissa), daughter of the keeper of Cuddapah fort. The name “Tipu” may have been chosen for the boy at birth (November 20, 1750) when his mother visited the tomb of the famous Muslim mystic Tipu *Mastan Aulia* in Arcot. Some writers suggest that “Sultan” was an adopted title for Tipu when he ascended the throne, though several contemporary sources maintain that it was part of his name and not a title (Hasan, 1951/1971, p. 7). I follow Tipu’s own explanation of “Sultan” as title as found on his personal seal (Dirom, 1794, p. 251).
3. It must be noted, however, that Tipu’s policy in this regard was not unique but shows uncanny similarity with that pursued by the Roman emperors who often allied with the European barbarians to fight barbarians or, in Britain, by the Romano-British *bretwalda* of Kent, Vortigern, who invited the Saxon chiefs Hengist and Horsa from the Continent to fight against his enemies nearer home, the Picts of the hilly north (Scotland) and the Scots of Ireland.
4. According to the foreword by the Raja of Panagal, Tamil Nadu, “on the whole, the work is one of the most unbiased contributions to Indian history.”
5. This Canarese expression is borrowed from the liberal Kerala politician Veerappa Moily (1999) who, however, believes that both Haidar and Tipu were, indeed, “true sons of the soil.”
6. Tipu’s ancestor, a Quraishi Arab named Hasan Bin Yahya, had been appointed Sheriff of Mecca by the Ottoman caliphate (Nadvi, 2004, chap. 4). An admirer of Tipu claims his legitimacy to the throne of Mysore but questions that of the Wodeyars unwittingly by stating that their “dynasty was not really long established” and that the British “partly constructed the Wodeyar dynasty’s legitimacy.” Thus, she writes in mildly mocking tone, “The Company promptly restored his [Tipu’s] throne to its supposedly rightful incumbent, the puppet king Krishnaraja Wodeyar, age five and ‘of a timid disposition’” (Jasanoff, 2005, 175, 184, 363 n. 99).
7. Bandyopadhyay (2002) observes that Tipu’s coins are similar to Haidar’s bearing the figure of the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati or Vishnu (Ray, 2002). But Brittlebank states on the authority of Henderson (1921, pp. 13-14) that although Tipu retained Haidar’s initials and the icon of the elephant on the coins minted during his reign, “he did away with the Hindu figures . . . and adopted a style which was predominantly Islamic” (Brittlebank, 1997, p. 67).
8. Wilks does not mention how he obtained the information on Tipu’s reaction to Mornington’s letter of January 9, 1799.
9. See a judicious analysis of Tipu’s Islamic leanings and reputation in Brittlebank (1997).
10. Tipu appears to have regarded the European Christians as infidel though he occasionally referred to the Hindus by this term.
11. Tipu also recruited some converts in his slave battalion (*chelas*); Datta, 1924; see also Appendix A: iii and v).
12. Anyone going through Wellesley’s dispatch of March 20, 1799, to the Court of Directors of the East India Company (EIC) in London would notice the sense of confidence on the part of the Governor General in his military preparations and prospects and in the “comparative Weakness, . . . Disappointment, and probably Dejection” of the ruler of Mysore (Lambert, 1975, pp. 3-23).
13. For Kirkpatrick, see Dalrymple (2002) and Chancey (2003, chaps. 7 and 8).
14. It is tempting to ponder if such a sanguinary wish was quite natural for someone who experienced Tipu’s hospitality in incarceration.
15. I borrow this expression from Moi (1985) without, however, the pejorative connotation attached to it by her.
16. Colley’s (2000) casual remark “tiger and lion imagery had another less acknowledged significance for the British” does refer to a lion’s superiority in a quote but she never expatiates on its significance (pp. 267-268). For some curious

interpretations of Tipu's toy, see Brittlebank (1995) and Jasanoff (2005).

17. "The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India" exhibition at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh (July 29-October 3, 1999; see www.tigerandthistle.net/scots43.htm).
18. Muthanna's book was cited by the dissenters extensively in their protest. If Gidwani is the purveyor of a virus, then Muthanna's book written earlier now served as what may be called a violent antidote. Both works ought to be considered marginal from academic standpoint but both command wide readership among the Indians.
19. See, especially, the article by Ravi Varma (1923; a member of Kerala's historic royal family, the Zamorins).
20. For a similar assessment of British rule, see also Sil (2005).
21. In his letter soliciting the Sublime Porte's "assistance to our Brethren Mussulmans; support our holy theology, and not withhold my power and endeavours in defending the region of *Hindustan* [italics added] from the machinations and evil of these enemies [the English]," Tipu shows his notion of territoriality but not polity. However, his notion of a nation is devoid of its conventional secular political meaning. He considered the Muslims as a "nation" as he did in respect of the English and the French by considering them as nations of infidels (Kausar, 1980, p. 268).

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