Tiger

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The Life of Tipu Sultan

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juggernaut

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To the memory of my godfather
Roy C. Gregson

A man of infectious curiosity

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Timeline

c. 1720	Haidar Ali born
1750	Tipu Sultan born, 20 November
1751–52	Siege of Tiruchirappalli
1761	Haidar secures total power in Mysore
1767	Outbreak of First Anglo-Mysore War Tipu receives first military command
1769	First Anglo-Mysore War ends
1774	Tipu marries first two wives
1780	Outbreak of Second Anglo-Mysore War Battle of Pollilur

1782	Death of Haidar: Tipu assumes power
1784	End of Second Anglo-Mysore War
1785	Kodagu rebellion crushed
1786	Embassy to Ottoman Sultan sails from Malabar coast
	Earl Cornwallis appointed British governor-general of India
	Marathas invade northern Mysore
1787	Tipu concludes peace with Marathas
	Embassy to French king departs
1788	Kodagu rebels: regains most of its territory
1789	Embassy to French king arrives home
1790	Embassy to Ottoman Sultan arrives home
	Outbreak of Third Anglo-Mysore War
1792	End of Third Anglo-Mysore War: princes taken hostage

1794	Princes return to Mysore
1797	Lord Mornington appointed British governor-general of India
1798	Tipu's embassy reaches Mauritius; French governor issues proclamation Proclamation published in Calcutta newspaper
1799	British and allies invade Mysore: Tipu killed 4 May

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Myth vs Reality

Windsor Castle, a popular tourist destination not far from London, is an ancient seat of the British royal family. On days when the grand galleries, with their splendid royal portraits and luxurious furnishings, are open to the public, the visitor can view a number of cabinets displaying items from the Queen's collection, many acquired as gifts from loyal subjects to whichever sovereign sat upon the throne. Naturally, for a monarch, only the most magnificent of objects would do. Around two hundred years ago, a number of Indian artefacts came into the collection, presented to George III and his successors. They were war loot, seized after the fall of Srirangapattana, the capital of Mysore,

in 1799; all had belonged to Tipu Sultan, the late ruler of that kingdom.

The most stunning of the objects in the cabinets is the life-sized gold tiger's head that formed part of Tipu's throne, known colloquially as the 'Massy Tiger'. Crystal teeth bared, it glares through the glass as if permanently outraged by its owner's inglorious end. Nearby is one of Tipu's war banners; made of green velvet, it is decorated with a stylised calligraphic tiger mask. Deciphered, the calligraphy reads *asad allah ul-ghalib*, 'the victorious lion of God'. Among other items of loot gifted to the British king were a jewel-encrusted *huma* bird that had stood atop the canopy of the throne, a war dress and helmet, a cotton tent panel patterned with tiger stripes, some velvet palanquin cushions, again with tiger stripes and embroidered in silk and gold, and one of Tipu's seals. But this was only a tiny fraction of the vast amount of plunder seized by the victorious troops in the aftermath of Tipu's death. So extensive was the looting, numerous artefacts associated with

him can be found scattered across the British Isles in museums and other collections. From the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh to Powis Castle in Wales to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, today's tourist can see displays of Tipu memorabilia from the martial to the mundane.

For thirty years, first Haidar Ali, Tipu's father, then Tipu himself, had been at the forefront of the British public's consciousness. Terrifying tales of attacks on British forces and threats to trading settlements such as Madras appeared in the newspapers of the day, embellished by distance as they were carried home by sea. Over the decades and through four Anglo-Mysore wars, people hungrily awaited reports of the latest outrage perpetrated by the so-called tyrants. The return of British prisoners of war, some of whom had been held captive in Mysore for several years, led to the writing of books that told harrowing stories of hardship and torture. That many of these accounts were self-serving was of little interest to

their avid readers. So by the time he died at the hands of General Harris's troops, as they besieged his island capital in 1799, Tipu Sultan was possibly the most famous Indian, if not villain, in the United Kingdom.

Not surprisingly, celebrations in Britain at the news of Tipu's demise fuelled further creative output on the part of not only authors and playwrights but also artists, who put paint to canvas to glorify the victory. Careers were launched and some ended. Arthur Wellesley, later to become the Duke of Wellington, famous for defeating Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, was placed in charge of Srirangapattana and then went on to overcome the Marathas in 1803, at the Battle of Assaye. India was Wellesley's proving ground. The governor-general, Lord Mornington, who was Arthur's older brother Richard, did not fare so well. Having ordered the attack on Mysore in defiance of his political masters at home, and despite energetic attempts by his supporters to vindicate him, his only reward was an undistinguished Irish

peerage and retirement. Well into the nineteenth century, the infamous figure of Tipu Sultan held sway in the public mind. As late as 1868, Wilkie Collins chose the siege of Srirangapattana and its subsequent looting as the setting for the opening of his bestselling novel *The Moonstone*.

One has to wonder what Tipu would have made of it all. Also, would he have cared? Very probably, he would. To terrorise his enemies was his goal and in that he had succeeded, not only through his actions but also by his clever use of imagery and symbolism. Although he did not realise it, his choice of the tiger motif for his insignia resonated strongly with the British, whose own emblem is the lion. It is no coincidence that the Seringapatam medal, awarded to those who had taken part in the siege, depicts a rampaging lion mauling a supine tiger. The ecstatic celebrations would also have confirmed in Tipu's mind that he had been correct in his assumption that the East India Company's expansionist activities were a credible threat to the freedom of the

subcontinent's inhabitants, that he was the last bulwark against British imperial desires. It is this prescience that distinguishes Tipu and his father from their contemporaries. With Tipu gone, the Company was able, in his own words, to 'fix [its] talons' ever deeper into Indian soil.

Local rulers and chiefs, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad or the Maratha Peshwa, frequently failed to recognise the danger posed by allowing British Residents – ostensibly ambassadors but in truth much more than that – to be assigned to their courts. In contrast, Europeans were forbidden from entering Mysore territory uninvited, for whatever purpose, on threat of imprisonment. Those who did make the mistake of crossing the boundaries of the realm soon found themselves in difficulties, sometimes forced into military employment even if they were completely untrained. When one man who ended up in this position – an English clerk who had unwittingly wandered across Mysore's border – protested that he had no skill in warfare, Haidar responded that

he 'never doubted the soldiership of a man who wore a Hatt', and proceeded to recruit him. The Mysore ruler and his son understood all too well that what set European armies apart from Indian troops was their technical expertise and superior discipline, and they set about correcting the imbalance through the use of French mercenaries.

Haidar and Tipu's closely guarded borders meant that their adversaries were forced to rely on second-hand reports, usually from spies. One of the tasks of the Company's Residents at Indian courts, such as Hyderabad or Pune, was the recruitment and management of secret agents. They also monitored reports the Indian rulers received from their own informants. As is always the case with espionage, the risk of betrayal and double-cross was ever-present, as well as unfounded rumour. In such an environment, of subterfuge and incomplete information, threats can be magnified, feeding the existing paranoia about the enemy's intentions. By the time Lord Mornington made the decision to order

the invasion of Mysore in February 1799, any semblance of reality concerning the threat Tipu posed had long been lost from sight.

But since this book is about Tipu Sultan's life rather than his death, should we be concerned with how he was perceived by his enemy? At one level, such perceptions are little more than what might nowadays be referred to as 'colour and movement' – they tell us virtually nothing about who Tipu really was. At another level, though, it is useful to be aware of the mythmaking surrounding this controversial figure, so as to avoid the pitfalls associated with believing the propaganda. We cannot understand the past by viewing it through the prism of the present; hindsight is proverbially described as 'a wonderful thing' but it can also be a hindrance.

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Let us imagine, then, what it might have been like to have been alive in south India in the

second half of the eighteenth century. It is many decades since the great empire of the Mughals, who had dominated the political and financial affairs of the subcontinent for over 150 years, slipped into decline. New powers have risen and fallen, carved out of the remnants of the old empire: Arcot in the south, for example, Bengal and Awadh in the north. But you only know this if you are a member of the literate elite. If you are a peasant, such matters are irrelevant – instead your interests are related to survival and being left in peace. The life of the peasant revolves around the seasons, planting and harvests, and the small daily religious rituals that bring comfort to what is an often arduous existence. Most of all, you do not want the land you till laid waste by war. For this you look to whoever is in power and has control over all aspects of your life. You are not so concerned if he calls himself a Sunni or a Shi'a, a Vaishnava or a Shaivite; more important is that he (rarely but occasionally a 'she') does not impose unreasonable taxes and provides protection from

attack. This last is particularly crucial if you have the misfortune to live in, or close to, disputed territory.

If you are a town-dweller, a merchant, say, your interests are different, especially if business is suffering as a result of the entry into your markets of a new competitor, one that is making inroads into the spice and textile trades: the Europeans, who you will know as 'hat-wearers' and who have established footholds at a number of points along the coast. The hat-wearers are showing worrying signs of aggression and are ignorant of the correct ways of men. Although you try to avoid having to deal with them, there are some in your community who believe there may be advantages in doing so. As time goes on, you realise that the hat-wearers are not all the same; they have different loyalties and speak a range of languages. Conflict breaks out between them, involving local rulers who take opposing sides. It is hard to know how to respond to these developments.

And if you are of a military inclination, an

ambitious adventurer perhaps, a man like Haidar Ali, you have used your considerable abilities to work your way into power, first as a soldier in the forces of Mysore, then as *faujdar* of the fort of Dindigul (in present-day Tamil Nadu) – at that time part of the Wodeyars' Mysore kingdom – and on up the ladder of rewards, until you have removed all opposition and seized control of the realm. But you do not proclaim yourself ruler. Throughout your initially tenuous but later firm control of the kingdom, you rule in the name of Krishna Raja Wodeyar II and his successors, the latter selected by you as children and virtually your prisoners. To the outside world, you maintain the fiction that you are merely the Dalavai or commander-in-chief of Mysore. But all who see and understand the true situation know that you are in charge, referring to you variously as 'Haidar Naik' or 'Nawab'. For all intents and purposes you are the king and are recognised as such – you wield the *danda*, the rod of force, a defining attribute of kingship. In 1763, you seize the wealthy city