



The Black Hole of Calcutta - a modern version



by David Johnson

David Johnson's attempts to surmount the barriers of officialdom and bureaucracy to gain entry to the Command Museum at Fort William led him to conclude that the spirit, if not the methods, of Siraj-ud-Daula, the last independent nawab of Bengal (1756), are alive and well.



As most British schoolchildren know, the story of the Black Hole of Calcutta tells of a traumatic moment in imperial history when 146 men, women and children of the British community in Bengal were crammed into a tiny 18ft prison cell on the night before the 1756 June monsoon broke. Only 23 remained alive in the morning. Shortly afterwards Robert Clive at the Battle of Plassey (1757) avenged their crushed, suffocated companions.

Many historians now doubt that this is actually a true account of the events of that night, even if few go so far as the *Express News of Calcutta*, which has described the whole incident as myth: 'a piece of propaganda created to depict Indians as barbarians'.

This may be so, but what I can report with confidence is that there is still a 'black hole' in Calcutta, and it involves a fort. Thus the story begins ...

Mission outline

I arrived from London on Sunday. The purpose of this six-day trip was to research Fort William, the seat of British India's military might based in Calcutta, the original capital of British India until 1911. Fort William was the headquarters of the British Army, subsequent home to the Eastern Command of the Indian Army. Inside the military compound there is an important military museum and Kitchener's residence when he was Commander-in-Chief. I was to be escorted for a day or two around the Fort William army complex visiting Kitchener's house and the museum, both located inside the complex and therefore shut-off to the civilian world. These historic British buildings remain intact and are in daily use. The small cannon, discharged daily during the Raj at 1300 from Calcutta dock, was used to provide the accurate time check for mariners to set their chronometers by and has been preserved inside the complex. Best of all, a visit to the extraordinary (British) military museum that I had read so much about, was promised.

In the beginning

I started on Monday to obtain military permission for the visit. Four days later, and after intense effort, I had not succeeded.

Wing Commander S N Mukerjee is the Chief Public Relations Officer, Ministry of Defence Eastern Command, of the Indian

Army. The Command headquarters are within Kolkata city (*Ne. Calcutta*), and is where the Wing Commander is located. All foreign media representatives require permission from the Director of Public Relations in Delhi to visit Fort William's museum. Surprisingly, the Indian Army Eastern Command has not hosted a foreign media correspondent before, so a potential scoop for *The Officer*, but the beginning of a nightmare for me.

The clarity of Indian telephone landlines from Kolkata to Delhi is remarkably good. But securing an intelligible response from the other end is another matter. Over four days, messages, faxes and endless phone communication attempts were initiated only to find receivers either engaged, unanswered or unobtainable, voice contact often cut off mid-sentence for no apparent reason, the reconnection sometimes taking an hour or two.

This was frustrating enough, but having finally tracked down the Indian Military Director of Public Relations, Dr P J Bandopadhyay at HQ Delhi, and obtained permission from the central Indian tri-service MoD, the Eastern Division in Kolkata changed the goal posts, insisting on further and different written clarification. A further 36 hours passed by sorting that out.

I was reminded of Kipling's 'Ballad of East and West' (1892):

*Oh, East is East, and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently
at God's great Judgement Seat.*

'Military intelligence approval was now required, a secret process that can take weeks'

Far left and near left: Everyday scenes in Calcutta, a city teeming with people, life and activity

