
Several years ago, an Indian television network decided to air a serial on the life of the legendary Tipu Sultan [Tîpū Sulṭān], the eighteenth century Muslim king of Mysore. A storm of protest was raised in fanatic Hindutva quarters, branding Tipu as a blood-thirsty Muslim tyrant, thus challenging the wisdom of a television serial that sought to depict him in anything less than demonic terms. It is probably because of a deep-rooted hatred of anything remotely Islamic that Tipu, along with his father, Haider Ali [I-Haydar ‘Ali], is so little known in the land of his birth today. But, as this remarkable book seeks to argue, Tipu was one of the most enlightened rulers of his times, well deserving to be included in India’s pantheon of heroes.

Irfan Habib provides a general introduction to Haider Ali and Tipu’s lives, pointing out that they were among the most liberal rulers of their era, genuinely concerned with the prosperity of their subjects, irrespective of religion. Thus, he shows, citing hitherto little-used documentary evidence, that Tipu made significant reforms in the administrative system of his kingdom, simplifying and lightening the tax burden on his subjects, introducing new technologies and machinery from Europe and expanding the trade links between India and Arabia and beyond. Further, he was one of the few Indian rulers of his times to have struggled till the last against the British. On all counts, then, Tipu seems to have been a cut above his contemporaries, whether Hindu or Muslim.

A series of short pieces on the political history of eighteenth century Mysore follows Habib’s introduction. Most of these deal in tiring detail with the intricacies of conspiracies and wars between the Mysore rulers, the British, the French and the local rajas of present-day Kerala, which would be of interest only to the specialist. Another set of pieces deal with the remarkable progress that Mysore made under the wise rule of the father and son duo in such fields as agriculture, sericulture, manufacturing, commerce and trade.

For those fed with the myth of Tipu as a fiery anti-Hindu iconoclast, two pieces included in this volume should suffice to set all misconceptions at rest. Subbaraya Chetty’s piece documents the numerous endowments and gifts given by Tipu to various Hindu temples in his kingdom. B.A. Salotre’s curiously titled article “Tipu Sultan as Defender of Hindu Dharma” is brilliantly researched, throwing light on the complex, but little-understood, process of inter-community relations in late medieval India. Salotre provides
an exhaustive list of Tipu’s grants to various Hindu temples in his kingdom, and also includes excerpts from the correspondence between Tipu and several Hindu priests. Of particular interest is the exchange of letters between Tipu and the priest of the Sringeri Math, one of the main Brahminical centres in South India. When the Math was attacked and looted by the [Hindu] Marathas, the priest appealed to Tipu for help. Tipu, in his generosity, provided the temple with immediate relief and a large grant in cash and kind.

Such was Tipu, a man clearly ahead of his times as this book shows. Little wonder, then, that he remains a thorn in the flesh of the Hindutva camp, being relegated to not more than a paragraph in most history text-books. This book is an admirable attempt to expand that paragraph into a comprehensive life story.

Yoginder Sikand


The new turn that the war in Afghanistan has taken has had serious consequences for the stability not only of the South Asian region, but for the entire world as such. The dangers of a global conflict have never seemed so real, as American war-mongers, Islamist militants and Hindutva hot-heads and other such traders in war threaten to drown the world in seemingly endless strife. As the “clash of civilisations” thesis threatens to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, millions of people, and not just in Afghanistan alone, have been rendered as hapless victims of the war over Kabul.

This slim book provides a general overview of the present conflict in and over Afghanistan and its implications for our part of the world. Written from a distinctly leftist perspective, it is a sharp critique both of American imperialism and the crude identity politics of Islamists and Hindutvawadis alike. Prashad argues that to assume that the war in Afghanistan is simply, as Islamists, Hindutvawadis and the dominant Western media insist, a clash of antagonistic civilisations and religions is misleading in the extreme. Rather,