

VINEET BAJPAI

MASTANA

The Fallen Patriot of Delhi



TreeShade Books

Prologue

4th May, 1799 AD

‘His body is still warm.

He... he is refusing to die... John *saahab*!’

As John McGowen struck the seemingly impregnable stoned floor yet again with his pickaxe, Muntasir Bakhsh shivered in the manner of a man possessed. His eyes were rolled up like those of an entranced *dervish* of yore, and his body trembled as if it were in the grip of a primordial *djinn* – clawing out from the dark depths of hell.

The nearly deranged young British officer of the East India Company did not flinch. Not anymore. He could die here tonight, in this ghostly dungeon, for all he cared.

My spirit will haunt this castle forever. If I don't acquire this cursed treasure tonight, no one ever will!

The Englishman had no idea how fateful this thought was going to turn out.



The cannons continued to roar in a devastating barrage, their iron slug-balls bouncing off the indestructible *praacheer* or fort-walls of Seringapatam, the stronghold of the Tiger of Mysore.

Such a coldblooded war had never been witnessed on earth before. Never had such a mammoth siege been laid around a castle.

'*Sher-e-Mysoor* is a living corpse... saahab,' Bakhsh persisted.

The profusely sweating John McGowen feigned nonchalance towards the words of his native accomplice and continued to feverishly slam the stubborn floor with his pickaxe. But deep down he was not immune to the horror those words carried. Not even remotely.

'It has been three hours since they stabbed him multiple times. You even shot him under his ear. And yet his body burns like embers... he... he... he is a ghost, John saahab...'

'Oh, just shut up, will you, Bakhsh? Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP...!' screamed McGowen, pointing his finger ominously towards the bearded Mohammedan from the walled city of Delhi.

Convinced that he had silenced the foreteller of their inexplicable yet imminent doom, McGowen turned back to the arduous task of breaking further deep into the secret underground vault. What lay hidden below this last barrier was the known world's most priceless, unfathomable treasure.

The treasure of the Tiger.

The Tiger of Mysore.

The treasure of Tipu Sultan!



‘He knows we are here... sneaking... stealing... defiling the treasure he so loved and nurtured all his life...’ continued Muntasir Bakhsh in the hissing manner of an unscrupulous thief, now regretting the day he had agreed to embark upon the riskiest heist of all time. Only a mad man would dare to tread upon the Tiger’s gold.

Just then the stoned floor gave way. Cracks appeared. John McGowen raised his excited, terrified eyes to look at his lone accomplice of this horrifying night. Despite the chilling fear Muntasir Bakhsh felt, at this moment even his face convoluted, overcome all over again by the insane lust that gold instils in the hearts and souls of men.

Instantly forgetting his terror and his laments, he grinned madly at John. Before long Muntasir joined him in bludgeoning through the last barrier between them and the world’s most spectacular riches.

In less than thirty minutes, the two men smashed the final roadblock open and were clambering down the flight of stairs that lay revealed as the fruit of their courageous labor. The stairway seemed to lead into the darkest belly of the earth.

As they arrived at their ill-fated destination, what the two nearly lunatic men saw in the amber light of their flickering wicker-torches, was beyond their wildest imagination.

What they beheld in front of their dazzled eyes was the world’s most immeasurable, unimaginable and blinding spectacle of wealth!



They laughed and laughed.

Hysterical with the breathtaking exhibition of diamonds, rubies, gold bars, coins, jewelry, statues made of solid gold, chests full of sapphire, gem-studded vases brimming with precious stones, ropes made of gold wire, gems of the size of pigeon-eggs, ancient artefacts, diamond studded swords... all spread over what looked like a hall with no boundaries, the Englishman from London and the *Hindustani* from Delhi went completely insane.

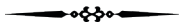
'You see... you see, you ol' blighter... *this* is what I have been telling you about! From this moment on, you and I will be the world's richest men!' yelled John in uncontrollable ecstasy.

What the young Brit had forgotten was that Tipu, the Emperor of Mysore, was still not gone. The Tiger's body had been disfigured by English swords and cartridges several hours ago. Any human corpse would have gone stone cold in a few minutes. But not Tipu. Even after four hours of the collapse of his mutilated body, Tipu's cadaver still scorched like a cauldron of hellfire.

He was watching them.

From his afterlife.

Tipu's tortured, enraged soul was now seeking a blood-sacrifice!



In the midst of what was a deathly silence, something stirred. It was like the rasping sound of rough stone grinding against a hard surface.

The two treasure-hunters exchanged petrified glances, before looking in the direction of the unnerving sound.

In their unhinged and premature celebration, John and Muntasir had missed a very important detail. The staircase that had led them to this treasure vault had ended in a stone-cut doorway. Almost ten feet in height and about four feet in its girth, this doorway was guarded by a sliding obelisk of a gate – precariously held up above a slippery channel. Stone floor-tiles of the cellar had been engineered to trigger the closure of this behemoth of a door when walked upon by unwelcome footsteps.

This massive door had begun to slide down, dropping several feet in one go. In an instant, the two men realized that a shutter of sorts, made of a single cut stone-block weighing several tonnes, was going to seal the vault for good. As dust blew from the groove and a more unnerving rumble announced the final drop of the stone colossus, the only two men to have ever entered the Tiger's treasure-vault uninvited, felt cold sweat all over their bodies.

This was Tipu's final trap for anyone who dared to enter his forbidden lair.



It was only now that they realized, to their cold horror, why Tipu was not leaving.

The Tiger of Mysore was lingering on for a purpose. Deep down in the dark, haunting cellars of his beloved Seringapatam Fort, alongside his fabulous wealth, the ghost of Tipu Sultan was going to entomb these two wretched men - *alive*.

For their *yaksha* or guardian-spirits to protect his cursed yet priceless treasure.

Forever.

Part I

*Kaun jaa.e 'Zauq'
par Dillī kī galiyāñ
chhoḍ kar*

- SHEIKH IBRAHIM ZAUQ

Phaansi-gar

Delhi-Mathura Highway, December 1856

Their teeth chattered as they pressed on further into the dense forest, lush green with freshly washed foliage and enveloped by a foggy, icy mist.

The freezing cold of the outskirts of Delhi had worsened as an outcome of harsh, unseasonal rains in the month of December. Shivering under the onslaught of the extreme chill and the incessant downpour, *sipahi* or *sepoys* of the East India Company could barely keep a grip on their lances, rifles and muskets. The whiteness of their cold knuckles matched the anxious paleness of their tense faces, as they inched further into bandit country.

Straining his eyes against the sharp raindrops, as he led his company of Hindustani sepoys on foot, *Subedar-Major* Chhagan Dubey tightened his grip on his service Brown Bess musket.

DHABBAAAAAAMM....!!

His powerful firearm roared, ripping through the eerie silence of the winter forest.

DHABBAAAAAAMM....!!

The very next moment he opened fire again into a distant thicket with his second musket, screaming a caution command so loud that his neck veins appeared ready to explode.

‘PHAANSI-GAAAA...R!’ he yelled, pointing in the direction of the undergrowth where he had spotted enemy movement.

Almost instantaneously, Lieutenant Robert D’Cruze, the Regiment Commander, pulled out his newly commissioned Colt revolver, and emptied all six of the gun’s chambers in the direction that Chhagan had pointed towards. His trust on Subedaar-Major Chhagan was second only to his unquestioned faith on his force’s most legendary warrior – who was currently leading a parallel pursuit, not far from where the D’Cruze Regiment was.

The sepoys also followed suit, opening fire a hundred rifles, and then charging with their bayonets and scimitars.

Hunt for the *Phaansi-gar* or the dreaded *Hangmen* had begun.



Phaansi-gar was another name for the notorious and cruel bands of dacoits and murderers who ravaged Northern India for hundreds of years – the *Thugs*!

Looting, robbing and killing unsuspecting traders, travelers and caravans since the 14th century, the Thugs were the most feared and despised bands of highway robbers and slaughterers. They had also wickedly earned the title of Phaansi-gar, because they were known to befriend travelers,

drug them during meals and then ‘hang’ or strangle them to death using a *roomal* or a noose. A *phaansi*.

It was only as late as the 1830s that the then Governor General of the East India Company, Lord Willian Bentinck, decided to eradicate the malaise of *Thugee*. He deployed a massive army of soldiers and spies to outmaneuver the dacoits. But it was easier planned than executed. The Thugs were not just robbers murdering innocent travelers. They were large bands of organized and armed brigands, fully prepared to take on the might of the East India Company head-on.



It was an ambush.

Unaware that they were being lured into a bandit-stronghold deep inside the dense forest, Lieutenant D’Cruze, Subedar-Major Chhagan Dubey and their soldiers charged into the depths of the jungle.

The Thugs were everywhere. Behind bushes, hidden in the thick of shrubbery, on tree-tops and perched atop hidden *machaans*. A hail of poison-tipped arrows, iron-grape crude bombs and country-made musket-shots greeted the sepoy company in what appeared to be an inescapable massacre. Twenty of the Hindustani soldiers fell in a matter of a minute or less.

Even though stunned momentarily at the brutal intensity of the Thug assault, the well-trained company of the D’Cruze Regiment soon regained its composure and scrambled for cover. The soldiers shot back at the bandits with the precision of the able marksmen that they were, inflicting some losses.

The ever-gallant Lieutenant D'Cruze had by now reloaded his revolver, even as his horse neighed in panic at the fiery chaos all around. He took the gun in his left hand and drew the sword strapped to his saddle with his right. He charged towards the enemy ranks fearlessly, shooting and slashing at the same time. Chhagan followed as well, closely on the heels of the young, decorated British officer.

But despite their renowned valor, today the D'Cruze Regiment was hopelessly outnumbered. The Thugs were in hundreds.

In the bloodbath and imminent death that surrounded them, every single sepoy of the company was now hoping for a miracle.

Their very own miracle.