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History of Modern India

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CHAPTER 5

RISE OF BRITISH POWER IN BENGAL

5.1 Introduction

The first major conflict between the British and an Indian power occurred in Bengal, which witnessed a gradual transfer of power from the Nawabs to the British between 1757 to 1765. During this short period of eight years three nawabs, Siraj-ud- Daula, Mir Jafar and Mir Qasim ruled over Bengal but they failed to uphold the sovereignty of the Nawab and ultimately the reign of the province passed into the hands of the British.

5.2 Bengal

The English East India Company (EIC) had vital commercial interests in Bengal, as nearly 60 % of the British imports from Asia consisted of goods from Bengal. Besides, Bengal was the most fertile and industrially developed province of India in the 17th and 18th century. Above all, the political condition in Bengal was not as disturbed as that in Madras and Bombay because Nawabs of Bengal maintained certain degree of order and peace in the province, which facilitated trade and commerce.

Factories and Farmans



Grant of Farman of 1717

The first English factory in Bengal was established at Hugli in 1651 under permission from Sultan Shuja, second son of emperor Shah Jahan and the then Subahdar of Bengal. The Subahdar granted the company the privileges of free trade throughout Bengal, Bihar, Odisha through a 'Royal Farman' in 1667, for a payment of Rs. 3000, as he was impressed by the services of Mr. Boughton in curing of

royal lady. English factories were set up at Kasimbazar, Patna, and other places in the province.

In 1717, Emperor Farrukh Siyar ratified the trade privileges granted to the company by earlier Subahdars of Bengal. This farman gave company the right to issue passes or Dastaks (Exemption from transit duty) for the movement of their goods. While the company's servants were also permitted to trade, it was not covered by this farman. They were required to pay the same taxes as Indian merchants.

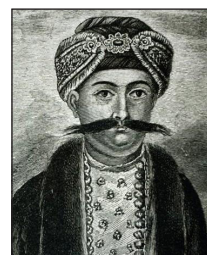
Tension in Bengal

The Farman of 1717 became a source of perpetual conflict between the company and the Nawabs of Bengal.

- It meant loss of revenue to the Bengal government as it allowed the British company to trade without paying transit duty.
- Moreover, the power to issue Dastaks for the Company's goods was misused by Company's servants to evade taxes on their private trade.

All the Nawabs of Bengal, from Murshid Quli Khan to Alivardi Khan, had objected to the English interpretation (i.e. the use of Dastaks for private trade) of the Farman of 1717 and compelled it to pay a lump sum to their treasury, and even firmly suppressed the misuse of Dastaks.

When Siraj-Ud-daula, who had serious apprehensions about the English practices, became the Nawab after death of Alivardi Khan, he demanded the Company to pay taxes on its goods, as it did during the reign of Murshid Quli Khan. But the Company, buoyed by its victory over the French in the south (in the Second Carnatic war), not only refused to comply but also levied duties on Indian goods entering Calcutta, which was under their control. This impudence did not go down well with the Nawab. The situation was aggravated by the Company's attempt to fortify Calcutta in expectation of an impending struggle with the French.



Siraj-ud-Daula

The Nawab ordered a demolition of the fortifications at Calcutta but the Company once again refused to comply with his order. The Nawab could not withstand such an attack on his sovereignty and launched an offensive

against the Company's possessions in Calcutta, leading to an incident which is known in the history as the Black Hole.

5.3 Black Hole Tragedy

The Nawab and his forces occupied the Fort William at Calcutta and imprisoned the English residents, including women and children, in a room in the fort. Excessive heat and suffocation took a toll on the prisoners, who according to some records are put at 146. Only 23 prisoners are believed to have survived when the room was opened on the next day. This incident is popularly known as the Black hole tragedy.



Black Hole Tragedy

Siraj-ud-daula has been held responsible for the tragedy. However, many historians either don't believe the story or put the number of victims to be far less than the above-mentioned estimate. This incident was used by the Company as one of the reasons for its aggression against the Nawab in the subsequent period.

5.4 Battle of Plassey (1757)

Introduction

As a corollary to Siraj-ud-daula's occupation of Calcutta, the British authorities in Madras sent a contingent under the command of Lord Robert Clive to recapture Calcutta. It was achieved without any effort, as Manik Chand, Nawab's officer in-charge of Calcutta, was bribed and he surrendered the city without any resistance. The Nawab made peace with Lord Clive by the Treaty of Alinagar, with the following terms:

- Restoration of former trade privileges to the Company.
- Granting permission to the British to fortify Calcutta.
- Promise of compensation to the British for losses suffered.

However, this did not please the English, who had now gone on the offensive. Robert Clive began to conspire with Nawab's officers.

Conspiracy

While Manik Chand, the Nawab's officer in charge of Calcutta, had been bribed to surrender Calcutta to English. Robert Clive also took an advantage of the disaffection among the Nawab's official. He made a secret alliance with Mir Jafar (The Commander-in-Chief of the Nawab's army), Rai Durlabh, Jagath Seth (an influential banker of Bengal) and Omichand (a rich merchant) to replace Siraj-ud-daula with Mir Jafar as the Nawab of the Bengal.

Causes

- **Misuse of Dastaks:** Misuse of trade privileges by the officials of the Company, adversely affected the Nawab's finances.
- **Attack on Sovereignty:** The fortification of Calcutta by the Company without the Nawab's permission and its refusal to demolish it on the Nawab's request was interpreted as an attack on the sovereignty of the Nawab.
- **Asylum to Fugitives:** The company further gave asylum to a political fugitives, Krishna Das, son of Raj Ballabh who had fled with immense treasures against Nawab's will.
- **Black Hole Tragedy:** Black hole tragedy was also an important reason for the conflict.
- **English Offensive:** Although the Treaty of Alinagar restored the Company's trade privileges, among others, it now was on the offensive and wanted to replace the Nawab with Mir Jafar.

Events

The Nawab's army, led by him, and the English army, led by Lord Clive, met on the fields of Plassey on 23 June 1757. The battle between the two forces was a battle only in name. While, the English only lost 29 men the Nawab lost nearly 500. A major part of the Nawab's army, led by Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh took no part in the fighting. Siraj-ud-daula was captured and murdered by the order of Mir Jafar's son, Miran.



Battle of Plassey and Robert Clive (in circle)

Aftermath

After the battle, Mir Jafar was made the new Nawab of Bengal as per Lord Clive's plan. The Company was granted undisputed right to free trade in Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. Mir Jafar rewarded the services of the English by grant of zamindari of 24-parganas besides a personal present of 234,000 pounds to Clive and giving 50 lakh Rupees in reward to army and naval officers. The company was compensated for the losses suffered at Siraj-ud-daulah's capture of Calcutta. All french settlements in Bengal were surrendered to the English. It was also understood that British merchants and officials would no longer be asked to pay duties on their private trade.

Significance of Plassey

Sir Jadunath Sarkar clearly mentions the significance of Plassey by saying, "on 23rd June 1757, the medieval period of India ended and the modern period started". For the British this Battle was important in the following ways:

1. **Political Importance:** It made the British masters of Bengal. The conquest of Bengal made it possible for the British to attempt the conquest of whole India.
2. **Economic Importance:** The revenues of Bengal enabled the company to organise a strong army and meet the cost of conquest of rest of the country. It also helped it win the third Anglo- French war. The control of Bengal's revenue and monopoly over its trade strengthened the financial position of the company. It helped the Company's servants amass untold wealth. Indian Industries declined rapidly after this Battle.
3. **Military Importance:** It also benefited the English navy as Bengal was situated near the ocean, it was very easy for them to move their troops as well as its vast resources helped them to conquer Marathas, French, Sikh etc.
4. **Moral Importance:** The events and results of the battle showed that the British did not give any importance to the moral values. They relied on conspiracy, greed, bribery, dishonesty and immoral acts to achieve their plans. The English kept morality aside and started economic exploitation of Bengal.
5. **Cultural Importance:** After this battle began a process which culminated in Anglicisation of India and its society. The British brought about a number of changes in the administrative, revenue, education and judicial structure of the country. It also increased India's association with the modern ideas that had been gaining popularity in the Europe.

The Battle of Plassey was an important event in the chain of developments that made the English the masters of India.

5.5 Mir Jafar

The new Nawab, Mir Jafar, was dependent on British for the maintenance of his position in Bengal and for protection against foreign invasions. An English army of 6000 troops was maintained in Bengal to help the Nawab maintain his position. Gradually all real power passed into the hands of company.

Mir Jafar failed to meet the heavy demands for money made on him by the company. He was criticised by the Company's official for his inability to fulfill their demands and eventually replaced by his son-in-law, Mir Qasim in 1760.

5.6 Mir Qasim

Mir Qasim was the ablest Nawab among the successors of Alivardi Khan. He had proven his administrative ability as the faujdar of Rangpur and Purnia. He transferred his capital from Murshidabad to Monghyr. Probably, he wanted to start the new capital afresh, away from the atmosphere of Murshidabad.



Lord Clive and Mir Qasim

Treaty with Calcutta Council (1760)

Mir Qasim promised to immediately take measures to relieve the Company of its financial distress. On 27 September 1760, he signed a treaty with the Calcutta council, with the following provisions:

1. Mir Qasim agreed to cede to the company the districts of Burdwan, Midnapore and Chittagong to help it meet all its charges, its army and provision for the field, etc.
2. The company was promised half the share in the chunam trade of Sylhet.
3. Mir Qasim promised to pay a sum of Rupees 5 lakhs towards financing the company's war efforts in Southern India.
4. The Company agreed to hold Nawab's enemies and his friends as the Company's enemies and friends respectively.
5. The company promised not to allow the tenants of the Nawab's territory to settle in the lands of the company and vice versa.

Thus, the company had an obligation of assisting the new Nawab with its army and was expected not to interfere in the general administration of the Nawab.

Mir Qasim and East India Company

The company had full faith in Mir Qasim, as an ideal puppet. He seemed capable of improving the finances of the province and in a better position to meet the heavy demands of the company.

Conflict Continues

Very soon the Company and Mir Qasim, were in a conflict with each other. Once again, the misuse of dastaks was the immediate cause of the conflict between the two. Besides, misusing the dastaks for their personal trade the Company's servants had begun to illegally sell these dastaks to friendly Indian merchants. These abuses put Indian traders at a disadvantageous position and diminished the revenue of the province.

Nawab abolished all the duties on internal trade to bring a parity between trade by Indian traders and that by the Company's servants. But this was resented by the Company's servants, who demanded a reimposition of the duties on Indian Traders. The situation gave rise to clashes between the two sides.

5.7 Battle of Buxar (1764)

A war between Mir Qasim and the Company broke out in 1763. The English gained successive victories at Katwa, Murshidabad, Giria, Sooty and Monghyr.

Causes

The Company wanted Mir Qasim to be puppet for it and meet its financial demands but Mir Qasim failed to fulfill the Company's expectations.

The Nawab- Company tussle over transit and trade duty led to the outbreak of wars between the English and Mir Qasim in 1763 which eventually led to the battle of Buxar in 1764.

Events

After being defeated in successive wars against the English, Mir Qasim escaped to Oudh and organised the confederacy with the Nawab of Oudh Shuja-ud-daula and the Emperor Shah Alam II in a final bid to oust the British from the Bengal. The combined armies of three powers numbering between 40,000 to 60,000 met an English army of 7072 troops commanded by Major Munro at the battlefield of Buxar on 22 October 1764 in a closely contested battle. Superior military of the English won the battle for them.

Aftermath

- Mir Jafar was once again reinstated as the Nawab of Bengal.
- A treaty of Allahabad was signed between Lord Clive and Shah Alam, the Mughal Emperor.
- The English set up a dual system of governance in Bengal after receiving the Diwani right of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha.

The Treaty of Allahabad

Robert Clive concluded 2 important treaties at Allahabad in August 1765: one with the Nawab of Oudh and the other with Mughal Emperor.

Nawab Shuja-ud-daula

1. Agreed to surrender Allahabad and Kora to Emperor Shah Alam II;
2. Pay Rs. 50 lakhs to Company as war compensation.
3. Give Basant Singh, Zamindar of Banaras, full possession of his estate.



Shuja-ud-Daula

Shah Alam II

1. Issued a farman granting the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha to the East India Company for an annual payment of Rs. 26 lakhs.
2. A provision of Rs. 53 lakhs to the Company in return for Nizamat functions (military, defence, police and administration of justice) of the said provinces.



Shah Alam II

The treaty made the Nawab a friend of the Company and turned Oudh into a buffer state. It made the Emperor a useful 'rubber stamp' of the Company. Besides, the Emperor's farman legalised the political gains of the Company in Bengal.

Significance of the Battle of Buxar

- It was one of the most decisive battles of Indian history as it demonstrated superiority of English Army over the combined army of three major Indian powers.
- The Company ceased to be a trading company and became a ruling power.
- The importance of this battle lay in the fact that not only the Nawab but also the Emperor was defeated by the British.

- The victory made the English a power to reckon with in Northern India and contenders for the supremacy of the whole country.
- The battle of Buxar confirmed the decision of Plassey.

5.8 Dual Government in Bengal (1765-72)

Dual Government

Robert Clive devised the dual system of government, i.e. the rule of two: the company and the Nawab in Bengal. Under this System, while the Company, as the Diwan, collected the revenue of the province, the Nawab and his officials were responsible for the administration of the province. Moreover, the Company also controlled the Nizamat (Police and judicial powers) through its right to nominate the Deputy Nawab.

Though the Nawab was responsible for maintaining peace and order, he was dependent for both funds and forces upon the Company because the latter controlled the army and the revenues

Reasons for Dual Government

- The administration of Bengal was in disorder. But the Company was reluctant to take the responsibility of administration of Bengal and it only wanted to make good of its revenue possessions.
- It was a reflection of the Company's unwillingness to recognise the transformation in its role from a trading company to a ruling power.

Impact

The system left the appearance of authority to the puppet Indian ruler, while keeping the sovereign powers in the hands of the Company. The Company had the power but did not own the responsibility whereas the Nawab and his officials, who had the responsibility, were not empowered to discharge it.

This system led to an administrative breakdown and proved disastrous for the people of Bengal. Neither the company nor the Nawab cared for the administration and public welfare. The Company's servants rack-rented the people. On one hand the Company was on the verge of bankruptcy, on the other its servants flourished exceedingly. Later on, Warren Hastings did away with the dual system in 1772.

5.9 Analysis: Battle of Plassey and Battle of Buxar

- Before Plassey the English Company was one of the European Companies in Bengal. After Plassey the company virtually monopolised the trade and

commerce of Bengal. It is often considered as the first revolution, which changed the company into a de facto power.

- If the battle of Plassey had made the English a powerful factor in the politics of Bengal, the victory of Buxar made them a great power of Northern India and contenders for the supremacy of the whole country.
- Eric Stokes, a modern writer, describes "the Plassey revolution as the first English essay in private profiteering on a grandiose scale". The consequences of Plassey shaped the form of British overrule and the modes of cultural contact.
- The battle, rather the retreat of Plassey was hardly important from Military point of view. It was just a conflict. The total casualties were 65 on Company's side and 500 on the Nawab's side. The English army showed no military superiority. It was desertion in the Nawab's camp that gave Clive the victory.
- The battle of Plassey and the subsequent plunder of Bengal, placed vast resources at the disposal of the English which supported the company's wars against the French
- If the victory of Plassey was the result of British conspiracy and diplomacy, the same can hardly be said of Buxar. Mir Qasim had made adequate preparations for the conflict and the Nawab of Oudh had assembled his best soldiers in the field but it was the victory of superior military power.
- Buxar confirmed the power and position of the England which they have achieved by the results of Plassey.
- The Battle of Buxar was only an attempt by the native powers to challenge the position acquired by the English in Bengal, Bihar, Odisha its victory in Plassey.
- After the Battle of Buxar, English power in Northern India became almost unchallengeable. They had to contend with the Afghans and the Marathas as serious rivals in their struggle for an Indian Empire.

5.10 Conclusion

It can, therefore be safely concluded that the both the Battles Plassey as well as Buxar had important effects on the growth of British Power in India but it is true that the results of the Battle of Buxar were more important for the British. The Battle of Buxar completed the work of Plassey. The eventual and secondary consequences of the Battle of Buxar were very important. By this war the English were drawn into connection with upper India, and were brought out upon a scene of fresh operations that grew rapidly wider.



Battle of Plassey (1757)

Causes	Significance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misuse of trade privileges by the Company officials. Attack on the sovereignty of the Nawab by fortification of Calcutta by the Company. Asylum to political fugitives by the Company. Black hole tragedy. The Company was on the offensive and wanted to replace the Nawab with Mir Jafar. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It made the British masters of Bengal. The revenues of Bengal enabled the Company to organise a strong army. The control of Bengal's revenue and monopoly over its trade strengthened the financial position of the company. It helped the Company's servants amass untold wealth. Indian Industries declined rapidly after this Battle. After the battle began a process which culminated in Anglicisation of India.

Battle of Buxar (1764)

Causes	Significance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failure of Mir Qasim to fulfill the Company's financial demand. The Nawab- Company tussle over transit and trade duty Outbreak of series of wars between the English and Mir Qasim in 1763 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It demonstrated superiority of English Army. The Company ceased to be a trading company and became a political power. The British defeated both the Nawab and the Mughal Emperor. It made the English contenders for the supremacy of the whole country. It confirmed the decision of Plassey.

Dual Government (1765-72)

Reasons	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company's reluctance to take the responsibility of administration of Bengal. Company only wanted to make good of its revenue possessions. Company's unwillingness to recognise the transformation in its role from a trading company to a ruling power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led to an administrative breakdown in Bengal. Neither the company nor the Nawab cared for the administration and public welfare. Company's servants rack-rented the people.



TRY THIS MAINS PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

- Why did the armies of the British East India Company – mostly comprising of Indian Soldiers – win consistently against the more numerous and better-equipped armies of the then-Indian rulers? Give reasons. (2022)