

BRITISH CONQUEST OF BENGAL

INTRODUCTION TO BRITISH CONQUEST OF INDIA

- * Political fragmentation - By 1750, India was witnessing the rise of multiple independent kingdoms, rebellious states, & successor states as central Mughal control collapsed.
- * Lack of Pan-India Vision - While the Marathas had the potential to establish a pan-Indian empire, they were primarily focused on their own regional Swaraj (self-rule) leaving a power vacuum.
- * British dominance - With the doors of India open, significant wealth present, & the absence of a unified central authority, the British East India company was positioned to dominate the country.

RISE OF INDEPENDENT BENGAL - MURSHID QULI KHAN

- * Independence of Bengal - Murshid Quli Khan was appointed as the Nazim of Bengal by Aurangzeb & secured his position by 1717. Upon gaining this power, he gradually distanced Bengal from Mughal control, effectively establishing it as an autonomous state.
- * Administrative reforms - To consolidate his autho-
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city, Murshid Quli Khan implemented several key policies:

- Replacing officials - He removed rebellious Zamindars & Jagirdars who maintained direct ties to the Mughal centre & replaced them with loyal major landowners.
- Land management - He increased the scope of Khalisa lands, ensuring more territory was under the direct control of the Nawab.
- Fiscal strategy - Jagirdars were transferred to the outskirts of the province such as Orissa, & he mandated that revenue be collected in cash, which helped stabilize the provincial treasury.
- Economic prosperity - By curbing local rebellions & streamlining administration, he fostered an environment of peace & prosperity, which allowed trade, crafts & industries in Bengal to flourish. This stability began to face new threats, particularly from the Marathas, towards the end of this period.

ALIVARDI KHAN'S REIGN AND CHALLENGES

- Challenges of Alivardi Khan - Upon becoming Nawab in 1740, his primary objective was to neutralize the growing threat of the Marathas. Despite his earlier military successes, the Marathas remained a dominant regional power, & he was ultimately

forced to agree to pay them an annual chauth or tribute to stop their devastating raids.

- ♥ Administrative shift - His tenure was marked by a virtual break from the Mughal empire. Appointments & major political decisions were made independently in Bengal, Bihar & Odisha without consulting the central leadership in Delhi.

- ♥ External threats - In addition to Maratha incursions, Alivardi Khan faced significant unrest from Afghan rebels who caused mass looting around the region, a conflict loosely associated with the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali between 1748 to 1761.

- ♥ Succession - Alivardi Khan passed away in 1756. He was succeeded by his grandson, Siraj-ud-Daulah, who inherited a state burdened by these unresolved internal & external pressures. Transition to Siraj-ud-Daulah marked the beginning of the end for the Independent Bengali principality, as it paved the way for the British East India company to eventually consolidate control by 1757.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SIRAJ-UD-DAULAH

- ♥ Internal opposition - Siraj-ud-Daulah inherited

several adversaries

- ★ Shaukat Jang - The Faujdar of Lurnia, with whom the Nawab had a long-standing rivalry.
- ★ Jagat Seth / Mahabat Rai - A powerful banker who refused to provide a 30-lakh rupee loan to the Nawab for his campaign against Shaukat Jang, leading to strained relations.
- ★ Ghazeti Begum & Nawazish Khan - The Nawab's rivals who sought the throne; Nawazish Khan was particularly favored by the British East India company & Roger Drake, the Governor of Fort William, who disapproved of Siraj-ud-Daulah.
- ★ The British stance - The British were unhappy with Siraj-ud-Daulah's ascension because they had supported Nawazish Khan. Roger Drake frequently wrote to the company reporting the Nawab's supposed character defects, setting the stage for future hostilities.
- ★ New capitalistic forces - The rise of Jagat Seth as a powerful financial influence is seen. By 1756, the British were borrowing nearly 3 lakh rupees annually from the banking house of Jagat Seth, illustrating how indigenous financiers began colluding with the British East India company against the Nawab.
- ★ Administrative instability - By the end of this

period, the Nawab's administration was effectively destabilized due to the compounding factors: his conflict with the British, rivalry with the French, & the betrayal of his own court commanders like Mir Jafar.

BRITISH PRESENCE IN BENGAL

- 1651 - The company established its first factory in Bengal, marking the start of their commercial presence in the region.
- 1698 - The company acquired the zamindari rights to three villages - Gobindapur, Sutanuti & Kalikata - which laid the groundwork for the city of Calcutta.

THE GOLDEN FARMAN OF 1717 AND DASTAKS

- The Golden Farman - A critical turning point occurred in 1717 when the Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar issued a Golden Farman or royal decree. This decree granted the British East India company the "right to issue Dastaks" or passes. A Dastak acted as an official stamp or signature from the emperor, proving that goods belonged to the company. By presenting these Dastaks at city gates the company's goods were exempted from local taxes or custom duties. This effectively allowed the

British to conduct duty free trade throughout the Mughal empire.

- ★ Monopoly & misuse - The Nawabs of Bengal suffered significant financial losses. The situation worsened when company officials began selling dastaks to private traders like French & Indian merchants for bribes.

- ★ The result - Because the British goods were duty free, they became cheaper than those of local merchants who had to pay a 10% duty. This destroyed market parity & allowed the British East India company to establish a monopoly in the Bengal market, turning the "dastak" into a major source of tension that persisted until the time of Siraj-ud-Daulah.

THE CONFLICT OVER FORTIFICATION OF CALCUTTA

- ★ The context - After Siraj-ud-Daulah became the Nawab in April 1756, the British in Bengal began fortifying Fort William in Calcutta. This action was taken in anticipation of the upcoming Anglo-French struggle, later known as the "Seven Years' war".

- ★ The conflict - The British Governor of Fort William, Roger Drake, proceeded with these fortifications without seeking the necessary permission from the Nawab.

- The French involvement - The French East India company, lead by Jean Law at their Chandernagore settlement, complained to Siraj-ud-Daulah about the British actions. The Nawab viewed this unauthorized fortification as a direct offense to his authority & a breach of protocol.
- The Siege - Due to these events & the existing support between the Nawab & the French, Siraj-ud-Daulah decided to personally intervene. In June 1756, he besieged Calcutta, eventually capturing the city after Roger Drake fled.

THE BLACK HOLE TRAGEDY

- The incident - After Siraj-ud-Daulah besieged & captured Calcutta in June 1756, the administration of the city was handed over to a local trader named Manikchand. During this transition, a number of prisoners were confined in a small airless dungeon referred to as "the black hole."
- The human toll - While contemporary accounts from the Nawab's court suggest that between 21 and 30 people died due to the extreme heat of the Indian summer, this figure was later massively exaggerated in reports reaching London.
- Exaggeration & Public opinion - News of the incident

reached London via daily newspapers, which inflated the death toll to over 120-130. This created a massive scandal, damaging the company's reputation & its share prices in the market.

TREATY OF ALINAGAR

- * Robert Clive's Deployment - Following the negative publicity in London regarding the Black Hole tragedy which threatened the British East India Company's status as a private enterprise & its market shares, the company command decided to dispatch Robert Clive from Madras to Bengal.
- * Reclaiming Calcutta - Upon his arrival on February 1757, Robert Clive successfully entered Bengal & reclaimed the Calcutta settlement.
- * Treaty of Alinagar - Siraj-ud-Daulah attempted to confront Clive, but after minor skirmishes on Feb 5, 1757, he realized his forces were no match for the British military. This led to the signing of Treaty of Alinagar on Feb 9, 1757.
- * Terms of the treaty -
 - Continuation of the Farrukh Siyar Farman of 1717 without interference from Nawab.
 - Maintenance of existing duty exemptions from the company.
 - * Granting of the right to mint coins to the British

utilizing the open "Taksal" or mint system prevalent at the time.

CONSPIRACY AND THE PATH TO "BATTLE OF PLASSEY"

- ✦ Admiral Watson's influence - Following the Treaty of Alinagar, Admiral Watson who had been sent by the British monarchy realized that Nawab's court was unstable. He used an agent named Khawaja Petrouse to gather intelligence.
- ✦ The conspiracy - Khawaja Petrouse returned with a lucrative proposal: Mir Jafar, the military commander of the Nawab's forces, was willing to betray Siraj-ud-Daulah in exchange for the British overthrowing the Nawab.
- ✦ The bribe - Between Feb & May 1757, negotiations intensified. The final offer from the conspirators, led by Mir Jafar & Jagat Seth - included a payment of 3 crore rupees, massive personal bribes for the British leadership & the handing over of all French settlements in Bengal to the British.
- ✦ The March - In June 1757, the British East India company marched from Calcutta towards Murshidabad. The British force was small consisting of 1000 British & 2000 Indian troops & 8 cannons.
- ✦ The outcome - The battle was effectively decided before it began because Mir Jafar, as the

commander of the Nawab's army, had pre-arranged to defect to the British side. The resulting collapse of the Nawab's forces at the Battle of Plassey permanently altered the landscape of Indian history.

THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY

- The Eve of Battle (June 22, 1757) - Both armies stood facing each other. Robert Clive was anxious & repeatedly wrote to Mir Jafar, receiving no reply, which caused Clive to briefly consider retreating.
- The strategic mistake (June 23, 1757) - Siraj-ud-Daulah waited for the British to attack, but he eventually trusted his military general, Mir Jafar, who advised him to return to his capital, Murshidabad. This was a fatal error, as Siraj-ud-Daulah was unaware of the betrayal brewing behind his back.
- The Betrayal and battle - Mir Jafar defected, bringing approximately 45,000 of the 50,000 Bengal troops over to Robert Clive's side. This left only 5,000 loyal soldiers under Mir Madan to fight the British.
- The aftermath - Mir Madan was killed, & by the evening of June 23, 1757, the Bengal army had

reached Murshidabad. Siraj-ud-Daulah was forced to flee. He attempted to reach Awadh to form an alliance with Shuja-ud-Daulah, but he was captured, brought back to Bengal & executed by Miran, son of Mir Jafar.

WHY PLASSEY WAS A MINOR "SKIRMISH"

- * Lack of military strategy - Unlike historical battles such as the "First Battle of Panipat" where advanced cannon techniques were used or the "Battle of Tarain" where specific cavalry tactics were employed, the "Battle of Plassey" showed no innovative military strategy.
- * Low casualty rates - Out of approximately 55,000 soldiers present on the battlefield, the combined casualties of wounded & dead were only around 550 which is less than 1% of the total force.
- * Historical misconception - The perceived importance of the Battle of Plassey was largely constructed by nationalist & colonial historians to mark the beginning of the British Raj. In reality, the Battle of Buxar is considered the true decisive conflict that cemented British control over Bengal.
- * Post-battle outcomes - Following the "skirmish" Mir Jafar became the new Nizam & the British secured significant financial compensation, personal

bribes & the expulsion of French settlements establishing their commercial & political monopoly.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY

- * Political context - By the time Mir Jafar became the Nawab of Bengal on June 29, 1757, the British East India company did not yet have a fully articulated plan to conquer or loot Bengal. However, the events that followed created significant challenges for both Mir Jafar & the company, eventually leading to the company's increased entanglement in the region.
- * The conspiracy - Mir Jafar sold out the Nawab of Bengal to the English, a deal facilitated through figures like Admiral Watson & Khwaja Petrus.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION OF BENGAL

- * The "cash cow" strategy - After Mir Jafar became Nawab, Bengal effectively turned into a source of immense wealth for the East India company. Between 1757 & 1765, Mir Jafar was coerced into paying roughly 2.5 crores annually to the company.
- * Personal enrichment - Robert Clive was personally awarded a large estate, which was valued at roughly 34,000 pounds sterling at the time.
- * Misuse of dastaks - The company exploited the

dastak. By selling these tax-exempt permits to private traders, the company gained a monopoly, which severely drained the Bengal government's tax revenue.

REIGN OF MIR JAFAR AND BRITISH ENTRENCHMENT

- Betrayal & loss of control - Mir Jafar's military forces, which had changed sides during the Battle of Plassey, grew disloyal once they realized the extent of his betrayal. To maintain his rule he was forced to rely on a 6,000 strong British East India Company force stationed in his capital, Murshidabad.
- False sense of security - Mir Jafar operated under the delusion that the British army was there for his protection. In reality, he lost control of his own military & court, as the British used their presence to gain leverage, often conspiring with his rivals.
- Precedent of Subsidiary alliance - This strategy - placing a foreign military force & an agent within the capital, was a precursor to the Subsidiary Alliance system later refined by Lord Wellesley. This tactic was famously used earlier by the French official Dupleix in Hyderabad to control the Nizam.

- Internal rebellions - Mir Jafar faced significant internal challenges, including uprisings from local zamindars & other Hindu rulers who opposed the puppet Government, leaving him effectively boxed in by both British demands & domestic instability.

CHALLENGES FACED BY MIR JAFAR -

- Diversion of funds - The company redirected Bengal's wealth to finance its own operations elsewhere in India, including the costs for the Battle of Wandiwash & purchasing trade commodities.
- Seeking foreign assistance - Realizing his precarious position, Mir Jafar sought to counteract the company's influence by reaching out to other European powers present in India, specifically the Danish & the Dutch.
- The Dutch intervention - The Dutch agreed to assist Mir Jafar. However, this attempt to weaken the British resulted in a direct confrontation known as the Battle of Bedara or Battle of Hooghly in 1759. The British forces, led by Robert Clive, decisively defeated the Dutch, effectively ending their political influence & aspirations in India.

TRANSITION TO MIR QASIM

- Family rivalry - A succession conflict emerged

following the death of Mir Jafar's son, Miran. This created a power struggle between Miran's heirs & Mir Jafar's son-in-law Mir Qasim.

- * The rise of Mir Qasim - Mir Qasim successfully cultivated a strong alliance with Henry Vansittart who had become the Governor of Fort William in 1760.

- * The Palace revolution - With the support of Henry Vansittart, Mir Qasim signed a secret agreement with the British. Consequently, in 1760, Mir Jafar was forced to step down from the throne, & Mir Qasim was installed as the new Nawab of Bengal. This transition marked a shift where the British increasingly exerted their influence to ensure the Nawab served their interests, solidifying their path towards political supremacy in the region.

1760s POLITICAL CONTEXT AND ROAD TO BUXAR

- * Consolidation of power - Following the Battle of Wandiwash, the British successfully defeated the French, further diminishing European rivalry & strengthening their hold on Bengal.

- * The Puppet Nawab - With Mir Qasim installed as the Nawab of Bengal in 1760, he became a puppet ruler in the hands of the East India company.

* Military strategy - Robert Clive & Admiral Watson successfully implemented a policy of stationing a permanent British force & an agent in the capital city, which ensured that the Nawab remained compliant & subordinate to British interests.

* International context - While events in India were shifting, global geopolitical changes were also a factor. In 1761, the Third Battle of Panipat resulted in the defeat of Marathas. Subsequently, the 1763 Treaty of Paris effectively ended the French political presence in India, leaving the British without major European rivals.

* The Path to Buxar - The culmination of this growing British dominance eventually led to the Battle of Buxar in 1764.
