
UNIT 8 THE BRITISH IN EASTERN INDIA UP TO BUXAR

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

The history of British domination in India started with the subjugation of Bengal to the British imperialist system. After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand the background of the British conquest of Bengal,
- learn about the transformation of power from the Bengal Nawabs to the British authority, and
- explain the factors that led to this transformation of power and its significance.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit introduces you to the gradual transfer of power from the Nawabs to the British in Bengal during the period 1757 to 1765. You have got some idea about the subjugation of Bengal to the British imperial system in Unit 2 of Block 1. In this Unit an attempt has been made to show that it was mainly the commercial rivalry between the British and the Bengal Nawabs which largely decided the course of events in the 1750s. The personal failure of any Nawab was not an important decisive factor for this development, as some historians have tried to establish. However, the degeneration in the administration that started in the 18th century had no doubt contributed to the final collapse of the independent Bengal polity. Here we have first discussed the background of the British conquest of Bengal and the political developments from 1757 to 1765. Then we focus on the explanation for this transformation and the significance of the battle of Plassey and Buxar which were landmarks in the process of British imperialist expansion in India.

8.2 BENGAL BEFORE THE BRITISH CONQUEST

You have read in Block 2 that the changes in European economy i.e. from feudalism to capitalism and then from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism led to fierce competition among various European powers to establish colonial empire. In this process of imperialist expansion Bengal became since the 17th century, the hunting ground of the Dutch, the French and the English companies. It was mainly the rich resources and good prospects of trade in Bengal which attracted the various foreign companies. Referring to Bengal Francois Bernier, a traveller who visited India during Aurangzeb's reign wrote:

"The rich exuberance of the country...has given rise to a proverb in common use among the Portuguese, English and Dutch that the kingdom of Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance, but not one for departure".

In the 18th century exports from Bengal to Europe consisted of raw products, such as, saltpetre, rice, indigo, pepper, sugar, etc. and silk, cotton textiles, handicrafts etc. Bengal goods comprised nearly 60 per cent of British imports from Asia in the early 18th century. Commercial potentiality of Bengal was naturally the chief cause of the interest of the English in this province.

Regular contact of the English with Bengal started in the 1630s. First English company in the east was set up at Balasore in Orissa in 1633, then at Hugli, Kasimbazar, Patna and Dacca. By 1690s the acquisition of the Zamindari rights of the three villages of Sutnati, Calcutta and Govindpur and the foundation of Calcutta by the Company, completed this process of English commercial settlement in Bengal. The annual investment of the Company in Bengal turned to £150,000 in 1680.

Since the 17th century the English East India Company was allowed to trade freely in Bengal, in return the Company had to pay annually Rs. 3,000 (£350) to the Mughal emperor. When the Company paid the Mughal emperor annually (£350) for free trade in Bengal that time Company's exports from Bengal were worth more than £50,000 a year.

The provincial governors were not in favour of such a privilege for the Company because this meant a heavy loss to their exchequer. So there was always pressure from the provincial administration to compel the English Company to pay more for its trade in the province. The English on their part tried to establish its complete control over the trade through various means. Murshid Kuli Khan, who established his independent authority over Bengal, was not in favour of the special privileges enjoyed by the Company because of the loss that resulted to the treasury. So the tussle between the English commercial interest and the local government in Bengal was already marked before the mid 18th century.

While the rising commercial interest of the English was becoming a serious threat for the Bengal polity, the provincial administration in Bengal itself had certain weaknesses. You have read in Unit 2 of Block I how an independent political authority emerged in Bengal, following the disintegration of the Mughal empire.

The stability of this regional power was dependent on certain conditions :

- Nawab's rule depended on the support of powerful faction of the local aristocracy.
- He needed the support of Hindu Mutasaddis who were in control of the financial administration.
- The support of the big Zamindars was also very essential because they not only supplied revenues to the treasury but also helped the Nawabs with their own militia in times of need and by maintaining law and order in their areas.
- The co-operation and support of the bankers and business houses, particularly the house of the Jagat Seths; the largest financial house in Bengal was also needed.

All these different groups had different interests and expectations from the Nawab. The stability of Nawab's regime depended on maintaining proper balance among these various interest groups. The common people had no place in this power equation between the ruler and the interest groups. They were the victims of the growing demands of the Zamindars but there was no protection from the administration. There was no initiative on the part of the rulers to involve the people in the anti-imperialist struggle.

8.3 THE BRITISH CONQUEST OF BENGAL, 1757-65

The history of Bengal from 1757 to 1765 is the history of gradual transfer of power from the Nawabs to the British. During this short period of eight years three

Nawabs, Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Jafar and Mir Kasim ruled over Bengal. But they failed to uphold the sovereignty of the Nawab and ultimately the rein of control passed into the hands of the British. We will now discuss the developments in Bengal from 1757 to 1765 and see how the British ultimately got control over Bengal.

8.3.1 Siraj-ud-daula and the British

Siraj-ud-daula succeeded Alivardi Khan as Nawab of Bengal in 1756. The succession of Siraj was opposed by his aunt Ghasiti Begum and his cousin Shaukat Jang who was the governor of Purnea. There was a dominant group in the Nawab's court comprising Jagat Seth, Umichand, Raj Ballabh, Rai Durlabh, Mir Jafar and others who were also opposed to Siraj. Besides this internal dissension within the Nawab's court, another serious threat to Nawab's position was the growing commercial activity of the English Company. The conflict between the Nawab and the English Company over trade privileges was nothing new. But during Siraj-ud-daula's reign certain other factors further strained the relations between the two. They are:

- The fortification around Calcutta by the English Company without the permission of the Nawab.
- The misuse of the Company's trade privilege by its officials for their private trade.
- The English Company at Calcutta had given shelter to Krishna Das, son of Raj Ballabh, who had fled with immense treasures against the Nawab's will.

Siraj-ud-daula was unhappy with the Company for these reasons. The Company on its part became worried about Siraj because the Company officials suspected that Siraj would cut down the privilege of the Company in alliance with the French in Bengal. Siraj-ud-daula's attack on the English fort at Calcutta precipitated an open

The arrival of a strong English force under the command of Robert Clive at Calcutta from Madras strengthened the British position in Bengal. The secret alliance of the Company with the conspirators of the Nawab's camp further strengthened the position of the British. So English victory in the battle field of Plassey, (June, 1757) was decided before the battle was fought. It was not the superiority of the military power but the conspiracy of the Nawab's officials that helped the English in winning the battle. It is very difficult to ascertain why Shiraj failed to take appropriate action. He could not save himself ultimately and was murdered by the order of Mir Jafar's son Miran.



1. William Watts negotiating the Treaty of 1757 with Mir Jafar and his son, Miran.

8.3.2 Mir Jafar and the British

Mir Jafar was promised the Nawabship by Clive before the battle of Plassey. This was his reward for his support to the British against Siraj.

The British now became the kingmakers of Bengal. Mir Jafar was made to pay a heavy price to his English friends for their favour. But the treasury of Murshidabad did not have enough resources to satisfy the demands of Clive and his fellow countrymen. Mir Jafar paid out about Rs. 1,750,000 in presents and compensation to the British.

Immediately after his accession Mir Jafar faced some serious internal problems. They were:

- Some of the Zamindars like Raja Ram Sinha of Midnapore, Hizir Ali Khan of Purnea refused to accept him as their ruler.
- Mir Jafar's soldiers who were not getting salary regularly were in a rebellious mood.
- He had doubts about the loyalty of some of his officials, specially of Rai Durlabh. He believed that Rai Durlabh had instigated the rebellion of Zamindar against him. But Rai Durlabh was under the shelter of Clive so he could not touch him.
- There was an attempt by the Mughal Emperor's son who later on became Shah Alam to capture the throne of Bengal.
- The financial position of the Nawab was also weak, mainly because of the demands of the Company and mismanagement of resources. All these made Mir Jafar more dependent on the English Company. But the Company was unhappy with the Nawab for some reasons.
- The English Company was under the impression that Mir Jafar, in collaboration with the Dutch company was trying to curb the growing influence of the English in Bengal.
- Mir Jafar also failed to respond to the ever increasing demands of the English.

Meanwhile the death of Miran, son of Mir Jafar, again created a conflict over the question of succession. The fight was between Miran's son and Mir Kasim, the son-in-law of Mir Jafar. Vansittart who came as Governor of Calcutta took the side of Mir Kasim. Mir Kasim in a secret agreement with Vansittart agreed to pay the necessary funds to the Company if they support his claim to the Nawabship of Bengal. Mir Jafar had already lost the confidence of the English. The rebellion of Mir Jafar's army for their due salary made it easier for the British to force Mir Jafar to step down.

8.3.3 Mir Kasim and the British

Mir Kasim's accession to the throne of Bengal followed the same way, the way through which Mir Jafar had come to power. Like his predecessor, Mir Kasim also had to pay large amounts of money to the English. Besides this he had given three districts of Burdwan, Midnapore and Chittagong to the English Company. After his assumption of power the two most important things that Mir Kasim did were:

- shifting the capital from Murshidabad to Monghyr in Bihar in order to keep a safe distance from the Company at Calcutta, and
- re-organising the bureaucracy by the men of his own choice and remodelling the army to enhance its skill and efficiency.

The first few months of Mir Kasim's reign went very well. But gradually the relationship with the British became embittered. Reasons for this were:

- Ram Narayan, the Deputy governor of Bihar, was not responding to the repeated requests by Nawab to submit his accounts. But Ram Narayan was supported by the English officials of Patna who never concealed their anti-nawab feelings.
- The misuse of the Company's Dustak or trade permit by Company officials for their private trade generated tension between the British and the Nawab.

The Company servants were not paying any duty on their goods. Whereas local merchants had to pay duty. While the Nawab lost tax revenue because of the nonpayment of duty by the Company officials the local merchants faced unequal competition with the Company merchants. Moreover, the Company officials were completely ignoring the officials of the Nawab. They were forcing the local people to sell their goods at low prices. Mir Kasim complained against these practices to Governor Vansittart, but this had no effect.

As it happened in the case of Mir Jafar, in the case of Mir Kasim also when the British found that Mir Kasim had failed to fulfil their expectation they started searching for a suitable replacement of Mir Kasim. But Mir Kasim was not ready to surrender so easily, unlike his predecessor. He tried to put up a united resistance against the British with the help of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam and Shuja-ud-daula of Awadh.

However, Mir Kasim ultimately failed to protect his throne and the battle of Buxar (1764) completed the victory and the domination of the British in eastern India.

8.3.4 After Mir Kasim

Mir Jafar was brought back to the throne of Bengal. He agreed to hand over three districts—Midnapore, Burdwan and Chittagong to the English for the maintenance of their army and to permit duty free trade in Bengal (except a duty of 2% on salt). But Mir Jafar was in bad health and he died shortly after this. His minor son Najim-ud-daula was appointed Nawab. The real administration was carried on by a Naib-Subadar, who would be appointed or dismissed by the English.

In the summer of 1765 Clive came back as the Governor of Bengal. Clive now engaged himself in completing his unfinished task, i.e. to make the British the supreme political authority in Bengal. He approached the Mughal emperor Shah Alam who was practically a prisoner of Shuja-ud-daula, the Nawab of Awadh, since 1761 for an agreement. The emperor responded positively to Clive's proposal. An agreement was signed between Shah Alam and Clive on August 1765. By this agreement Shah Alam was given Allahabad and the adjoining territories, while the emperor granted by a *firman*, the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the East India Company. The right of Diwani gave the British complete control over the Bengal revenues or financial administration.

The responsibility for defence, law and order and the administration of justice remained in the hands of the Nawabs. But the Nawabs had virtually lost their military power after the battle of Buxar. So after the grant of Diwani the Nawabs were in reality reduced to a cipher.

The above discussion shows how the political events from 1757 to 65 gradually led to the transfer of power from the Bengal Nawabs to the British East India Company. In the following section we will try to understand the factors that led to this change.



2. Clive receiving the Diwani of Bengal from Shah Alam, the Mughal Emperor

Check Your Progress I

1) What was the nature of Bengal polity? Write your answer in 100 words.

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2) Why did the relationship become strained between the British and the Bengal Nawabs? Write your answer in 100 words.

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3) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).

- i) The Bengal Nawabs did not object to the free trade of the English Company in Bengal.
- ii) The growing trade of the Company in Bengal augmented the financial resources of the Bengal rulers.
- iii) Siraj-ud-daula objected to the misuse of trade privileges in Bengal by the Company officials.
- iv) Mir Jafar's army rebelled against him because he failed to pay their salary.
- v) The British became critical of Mir Kasim because he wanted to establish his independent authority.
- vi) The right of Diwani gave the British complete control over the financial and administrative affairs of Bengal.

8.4 EXPLANATION FOR THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The above narrative of the political events from 1757 to 1765 shows, how the British gradually subdued the Nawab's authority and established their complete control over Bengal. What happened in Bengal in this period has been termed by many historians as a "political revolution". On the question, what were the causes of this revolution, historians opinions are divided. The attempt by some historians to find the cause of the revolution in the personal failures of the Nawabs is not tenable. The arrogance of Siraj or the treachery of Mir Jafar or the individual limitations of Mir Kasim by

itself cannot account for the transformation of Bengal's power structure. The issues involved in the conflict between the British and the Nawabs were some thing more significant.

It is argued by some historians that private interests of the East India Company officials provoked the conflicts with the Nawabs. Expectations of more trade privileges and rewards and attempt to make their own fortunes made the individual Englishmen defy the authority of the Nawabs. The misuse of trading privilege by the Company officials for their private trade became the bone of contention between the Nawabs and the East India Company. The firman or the imperial grant given by the Mughal emperor Farukshiyar in 1717 gave duty free concession only to the Company's imports and exports and not to the Company servants' private trade. The misuse of this trade privilege by the Company officials for private trade meant a heavy loss to the Nawabs treasury. Both Siraj-ud-daula and Mir Kasim complained to the Company against this misuse of trade privilege, but there was no change in the situation.

If the private interest of the individual Englishmen was responsible for the conflict with the Nawabs, the Company was also equally responsible for it. The Company was pressurising the Nawabs for greater trading privileges. The British wanted to establish their monopoly control over Bengal trade by driving out the French and the Dutch companies from Bengal. The English Company began to increase its military strength and fortified Calcutta against the wish of the Nawab. This was a direct challenge to the authority of the Nawab. After Plassey, company's pressure for larger subsidies increased and it demanded some Zamindaris from the Nawab to meet the expenses of the Company's troops. More alarming was the Company's involvement in the court politics of Nawab and interference in Nawab's choice of high officials. Thus, the growing authority of the Company and its dabbling in local politics seriously challenged the independent position of the Nawabs.

It is not difficult to see that the Company and its officials played a significant role in shaping the events in Bengal between 1757-65. However, no less significant was the role of some of the local merchants, officials and Zamindars in the establishment of the British political supremacy in Bengal. The house of the Jagat Seths, the largest banking house in Bengal, and the wealthy merchants like Umichand were not happy with the accession of Siraj-ud-daula. The Seths were the custodian of the Nawab's treasury and they had a significant control over Nawab's administration. Besides the Seths and other merchants, there was landed and military aristocracy who were a dominant group in the Nawab's court. This group became apprehensive of losing their special privileges which they were enjoying from the earlier Nawabs. Siraj-ud-daula's reorganisation of civilian and military administration by replacing old office holders gave ground for their apprehension. The Nawab's patronage to a new elite group represented by Mohanlal, Mir Madan and Khawaja Abdul Hadi Khan alienated the old officials from the Nawab. 'This alienation and the expectation of a better bargain by replacing Siraj-ud-daula with their own man brought the ruling clique into a conspiracy against Siraj-ud-daula.

The British who were in search of an ally for their own ends, found allies in this group. The British wanted to gain more trade privileges and to extract more resources from Bengal, while their Indian collaborators had the desire to establish their own political power in Bengal. Their common objective was to replace the present Nawab by a man of their common choice. Hence the conspiracy made the task easier for the British to establish their control over the Bengal Nawab.

To sum up, the economic interests of the Company and its officials and the growth of factions in the court at Murshidabad and the conflict of interests among different groups in the court were some of the factors which brought about the political transformation of Bengal between 1757 to 1765.

8.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF BRITISH SUCCESS

We have seen in the earlier sections that how decisively the British established their political supremacy in Bengal by winning two battles, one at Plassey (1757) and the

**British Conquest
and Consolidation**

other at Buxar (1764). Apart from the overall significance of the British victory the two battles had certain specific significance of their own.

The success of the British in the battle of Plassey had a significant impact in the history of Bengal.

- The victory of the British, whether by treachery or any means, undermined the position of the Nawab in Bengal.
- Apparently there was not much change in the government and the Nawab still remained the supreme authority. But in practice the Nawab became dependent on the Company's authority and the Company began to interfere in the appointment of Nawab's officials.
- Internal rivalry within the Nawab's administration was exposed and the conspiracy of the rivals with the British ultimately weakened the strength of the administration.
- Besides the financial gain, the English East India Company was also successful in establishing their monopoly over Bengal trade by marginalising the French and the Dutch companies.

The battle of Buxar gave them the complete political control over Bengal. Actually, the process of transition started with the battle of Plassey and culminated in the battle of Buxar.

The battle of Buxar sealed the fate of the Bengal Nawabs and the British emerged as the ruling power in Bengal.

Mir Kasim was successful in forming a confederacy with the Emperor Shah Alam II and Nawab Shuja-ud-daula of Awadh against the British. This confederacy failed before the British force. The victory of the British in this battle proved the superiority of the British force and strengthened their confidence. This was a victory not against Mir Kasim alone but against the Mughal Emperor and the Nawab of Awadh also. The success of the British in this battle gave a clear indication that the establishment of the British rule in other parts of India was not very far off.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Do you think that the personal failures of the Nawabs led to the political transformation in Bengal? Give your argument in 100 words.

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- 2) Write in 60 words about the significance of the battle of Buxar.

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

We have traced in this Unit the process of political developments that took place in Bengal between 1757 to 1765. We hope you have understood that the primary interest of the British at the initial stage was to tap the resources of Bengal and to monopolize the commercial potentiality of Bengal in the Asian trade. It was this growing commercial interest of the English East India Company and its officials which brought them in direct confrontation with the Bengal Nawabs. The weaknesses in the prevailing Bengal polity helped the British to win the battle against the Nawabs and the alienation of different groups from the rulers made the system vulnerable to external forces.

8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should focus on the dependability of Nawabs on various factions and its limitations, lack of cohesion in the administration etc. See Sec. 8.2.
- 2) Your answer should include the clash of interest between the Nawabs and the British, the growing interference of the British in the internal affairs of Bengal polity, etc. See Sec. 8.3.
- 3) i) × ii) × iii) ✓ iv) ✓ v) ✓ vi) ×

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write your answer in the light of interpretations given in Sec. 8.4.
- 2) Your answer should include the impact of the battle in Bengal and other parts of India, specially how it helped the process of British conquest in India. See Sec. 8.5.