

The Plundered and Sponsored State of Bengal After the Battle of Plassey (1757)

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ABSTRACT

The English East India Company came in India in the beginning of seventeenth century as a trading partner. In the initial phase, the Company was engaged in activities related with trade and commerce; however, it was through Bengal that the British initiated the path to colonization. The English East India Company attracted towards Bengal with the objective of profitable and prosperous trade that it had offered. Moreover, from the mid of the eighteenth century, Bengal offered valuable commercial privileges to the English Company as freedom to export and import without having taxes, prohibition on other European commercial companies in Bengal, etc. From this time onwards, the absolute powers related with 'Dastak' were severely misused by the servants of the Company to evade taxes on their private trade. This led to a direct conflict between the Nawab of Bengal and the English Company. The Company's interest in conquering Bengal was two-fold, i.e., protection of its trade and control over Bengal's revenue. It was on 23rd June, 1757 that the battle of Plassey was fought between the Nawab of Bengal and East India Company. The uncomplicated victory of English Company in this battle paved the way not only for the British annexation of Bengal but also their conquest of the whole of India. It established the military supremacy of the English in Bengal and raised them to the status of a major contender for the Indian empire. The revenues from Bengal enabled them to organise a strong army through which the Company conquered mighty Indian political powers as Maratha, Mysore, Punjab, etc. More to this, the elimination of the French commercial Company in India was the direct consequence of conquest of Bengal.

Keywords

Dastak; Drain of Wealth; Dual government; East India Company; Princely state

Objective of the study

The present study elaborately discusses the condition of political and economic infrastructure of Bengal in post-Plassey period. It depicts the changes in the nature and functioning of the English East India Company in the mid of eighteenth century. The paper also underlines the barbaric consequences of battles of the Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764).

Methodology

A descriptive research methodology was used to express and explore the basic design and selfish outlook of English East India Company towards princely state of Bengal. The researcher has relied both on primary sources as well as secondary sources for collection of data. Primary data has been gathered from archival records; whereas secondary data is based on analysis and discussions.

Introduction

During sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the settlement of European commercial companies in India resulted into interaction involving people with diverse political, socio-economic and religious paradigm. In this phase, the Portuguese, England, Dutch, Denmark and French commercial companies established trade links between India and Europe. In the initial phase of this relation the balance of trade was in favour of India. One can easily trace numerous literary evidence narrating that the gold of the whole world was moving towards India, during the above-mentioned period. As a result of these trade links European markets were flooded with Indian goods. Wealth began to flow from Europe to India which greatly contributed to the prosperity of India. However, in the later phase the nature of the European companies witnessed change and their influence increased in political and economic sphere of India. In fact, they started to influence the balance of power in the sub-continent.¹

The relations between European commercial companies in India were hostile with each other. Moreover, these relations were highly influenced by the events in Europe. However, due to weak fundamentals, unfortunate political vision, military strength, inadequate support from home, etc. the Portuguese, Dutch, Denmark and French commercial companies faced threat by the English East India Company. The English East India Company (*EIC*), initially known as, *Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies* or *United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies*, was an English joint-stock company formed on December 31, 1600.² Acting as a monopolistic trading body, the Company actively engaged in politics and emerged as an agent of British imperialism in India from the early eighteenth century to the mid of nineteenth century. The victories of Robert Clive at Plassey in 1757 made the English Company as the dominant power in India. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century the English had vanquished all others European powers and established themselves as the prominent political power in India.

¹ In order to benefit from the eastern trade most of the companies involved themselves in activities related with balance of power, whether in Indian provincial kingdoms or Delhi. Such acts were not ethical and moral by any standard.

² East India Company came in India with a vision of commerce and within a short span of time the Company gradually grew in size and gathered immense benefit from Indian trade. Through an official order by Mughal Emperor Jahangir, in 1613, the English Company was permitted to establish a permanent factory at Surat (port on western coast of India). In 1611 and 1651, factories at Masulipatnam and Hooghly, both on eastern on coast of India, were established respectively. In 1696, the English were given the zamindari of the three villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapuri. The new fortified settlement founded in this region was called Fort William. By a *Farman* (official circular) issued by Farrukhsiyar in 1717, the East India Company procured extra ordinary privileges and concessions in trading engagements in India. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the nomenclature of the East India Company was changed to *United Company of Merchants of England Trading in the East Indies*. However, in general phraseology it came to be known as the East India Company (*EIC*).

When the English India Company had consolidated their power in Bengal, the natural resources, treasury and native labour of Bengal were exploited ruthlessly. The period of economic exploitation adversely affected Indian culture and social life. The administrative, legal, revenue and military structures of the Mughal period were dismantled and an elongated phase of unhappiness, poverty and exploitation began. In short, it led to drain of wealth from India to England and added unprecedented poverty and overall backwardness in India.

Discussion

The weak central Mughal authority and contention stuck between the regional kingdoms, during eighteenth century, provided the English Company a chance to play vital part in Indian political affairs. In particular, the political circumstances in Bengal offered the East India Company an opportunity to interfere in political scenario. In 1756, the death of Nawab Alivardi Khan of Bengal created a vacuum that directly led to power struggle between contenders. In this situation, Siraj-ud-Daulah was raised to the throne, who was opposed by his aunt Ghasiti Begum and his cousin Shaukat Jang, the governor of Purnea. More to it, there exist a dominant counterpart group in the Nawab's court comprising Mir Jafar, Raj Ballabh, Jagat Seth and Umichand who were opposing the status of Nawab.

Besides internal discord, another grave threat to Nawab's position was the growing commercial activities of the English Company in Bengal. The Company was misusing the commercial privileges that were granted by *dastak*.³ The Company was abusing the privileges related to *dastak* by granting them to those who were not entitled to it. However, this issue was nothing new. During Siraj-ud-Daulah's reign certain other factors further strained the relations between the two. Among these factors, the prominent one was the fortification of Fort William, located around Cassimbazar, by the English Company without the permission of the Nawab.⁴ Siraj-ud-daulah regarded the behaviour of the English Company as an infringement of the Nawab's sovereignty. Consequently, the issue of fortification worsened the relationship of Nawab and the Company. Moreover, the English Company had also extended shelter to Krishna Das, son of Raj Vallabh, who had fled with immense wealth from the royal treasury of Bengal. The Nawab had taken this act as absolute disobedience and moved with his army against the English. On 20th June 1756, Siraj attacked on Cassimbazar and took over Fort William by destroying fortification. He imprisoned many English men and women who were taken to Calcutta. Among them many of the English prisoners died in a small room during imprisonment. This episode is referred as the Black Hole tragedy.⁵ Meanwhile the English administrators at Casimbazar waited for the military troops

³ In 1717, the Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar (1717-19) handed the East India Company extra ordinary trade privileges through the official circular (*farman*). This settlement enabled the Company to trade in Bengal without paying custom duties.

⁴ At that time, there was a possibility of outbreak of hostilities between England and France in Europe. The English, therefore, mounted guns on Fort William as a measure of protection against the French. What irritated the Nawab most was not so much the fortification themselves but the manner in which they were erected. The fortification was sought to be completed without his knowledge.

⁵ According to John Zephaniah Holwell, a contemporary British officer, Siraj-ud-Daulah attacked Fort William and imprisoned 146 British officials in an unventilated cell. The area of this cell was about 4.6 × 5.5 m (about 15 × 18 ft). It is said that on 22nd June only 23 persons remained alive. However, Indian historians doubt the authenticity of this incident.

from Madras. The troops from Madras led by Robert Clive and Admiral Watson captured Calcutta on 2nd January, 1757. The whole hostility came to an end with the compilation of the treaty of Alinagar in February, 1757 between the Nawab and the Company.

In the beginning of June, 1757 the English Company blamed that the Nawab is not carrying out the provisions of the signed treaty. On 23rd June 1757, the Company troops marched to Calcutta to confront the army of Nawab in the battlefield of Plassey, which is said to have lasted only for few hours. The fateful battle of Plassey was a battle only in name. In all, the English lost twenty-nine men while Siraj-ud-daulah, lost nearly five hundred men. The key part of the Nawab's army, led by the traitors, Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh stood still with their huge armies without fighting. Only a small group of the Nawab's soldiers led by Mir Madan, Mohanlal and a French officer, fought bravely. Betrayed by his own men Siraj was defeated in the battlefield of Plassey, who was captured and executed at his capital Murshidabad.

Soon after the war Mir Jafar was adored as Nawab of Bengal. As Mir Jafar got the throne with the help of English Company, he was merely a dummy and had no independent power or existence. In the post-Plassey period the English Company gained enormous territorial and commercial additions. Mir Jafar offered the zamindari right of the Twenty-four Parganas to Clive. In the contemporary historical writings the Twenty four Parganas has been described as the personal jagir of Clive. This made the English settlement of Calcutta more influential and prosperous. Similarly, the trade and privilege so far enjoyed by them were not only increased but also became more safe and sound. Henceforth, the British merchants and officials were not required to pay any taxes on their private trade.⁶ Mir Jafar paid a sum of Rs. 17,700,000 as compensation for the attack on Calcutta to the English company. In addition he paid huge amount as gifts or bribes to the high officials of the company. It was also understood that British merchants and officials would no longer be asked to pay any taxes on their private trade in Bengal.

Mir Jafar soon realised that he had struck only a bad bargain with the English. He soon found that it would not be possible to meet the demands of the Company. To escape from this situation he entered into a conspiracy with the Dutch at Chinsura. But Clive predicted the conspiracy. The Dutch Company was defeated in the battle of Bidra in 1759. Finally it has decided to make Mir Kasim as the Nawab. Mir Kasim agreed to pay off the outstanding dues to the Company and to cede the districts of Burdwan and Midnapur to the Company.

Unlike to Mir Jafar, Mir Kasim was an able and efficient ruler. From the very beginning he was determined to free himself from the control of English Company. As a first step, he initiated streamlining revenue administration and raised a modern and disciplined army on European patterns. It was obvious that all this was not liked by the English. Matters came to head when the Nawab made attempts to check the mishandling of the privileges given to the English by the *farman* of 1717. All these activities led to outbreak of war between Mir Kasim and the English. After a series of defeat, Mir Kasim fled to Patna where he had killed many English prisoners. He formed a military alliance in Oudh with Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah of Oudh and Shah Alam II, the fugitive Mughal Emperor, with a view to recover Bengal from the clutches of English Company. On 22nd October, 1764 the Indian allies were badly defeated by the English army led by Hector Munro in the battlefield of Buxar. The battle of Buxar demonstrated the superiority of English arms and war tactics over the combined strength of three major Indian powers.

⁶ In a single word it could be said that the annexation of Bengal enhanced the overall status of the Company. It raised them to a very advantageous position. It paved the way for the establishment of the British supremacy in India. Now they have gathered enormous resources, both money and man, that could be used in struggle against the French Company, both within and outside India. Hence, the English Company was no more dependent on the supply of resources from Britain.

In 1765, Robert Clive concluded the Treaty of Allahabad with the Mughal Emperor and the Nawabs of Bengal and Oudh. By this treaty, the Mughal Emperor formally accepted the English East India Company as the provincial administrators of Bengal. Henceforth, the English East India Company became the real master of Bengal. As the viceroy of the Mughal Emperor, the English Company exercised two functions: (a) to act as *Diwan*, i.e., revenue and civil justice, (ii) to act as *Nizam*, i.e. military power and criminal justice. This is termed as the *Dual Government of Bengal*. The English derived extreme advantage from this administrative mechanism. They enjoyed power without responsibility where as the Nawab was bonded to responsibility without power. The Company controlled the army and finances of the province where as the Nawab, who was responsible for administration, had no power to discharge it. Out of the collected revenues of Bengal, the Company was expected to pay 53 lakhs annually to Nawab as administrative expenses. This sum was reduced to 41 lakhs and 32 lakhs in 1766 and 1769 respectively.

East India Company: From Commercial Company to Political Power

The English East India Company was established with an objective to trade with India. However, the mid eighteenth century witnessed the conversion of the English East India Company from a commercial enterprise to a political power. Apart from the other numerous causes, the decline of Mughal rule obviously provided a great opportunity for the expansion of East India Company. In reference to Bengal, it was mainly the commercial rivalry between the British and the Nawabs of Bengal, which plotted the battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764). More to it, the deterioration in the administration provided a chance to the English Company to play a significant job in the politics of Bengal.

After the betrayal of Plassey, the company's priority shifted towards establishing an extended empire in India rather than collecting revenue. The Company decided to acquire the fertile region of Bengal in order to maintain its trade and military strength. The intention of the Company to remit the surplus revenue of Bengal as tribute through the channel of investment brought about certain changes in the nature of functioning of the Company. Moreover, the changing economic condition in Europe like advent of industrial revolution and weakening of political authority in India provided the Company a fillip to transform itself, both in terms of prospectus and activity.

Consequences in Post-Plassey Period

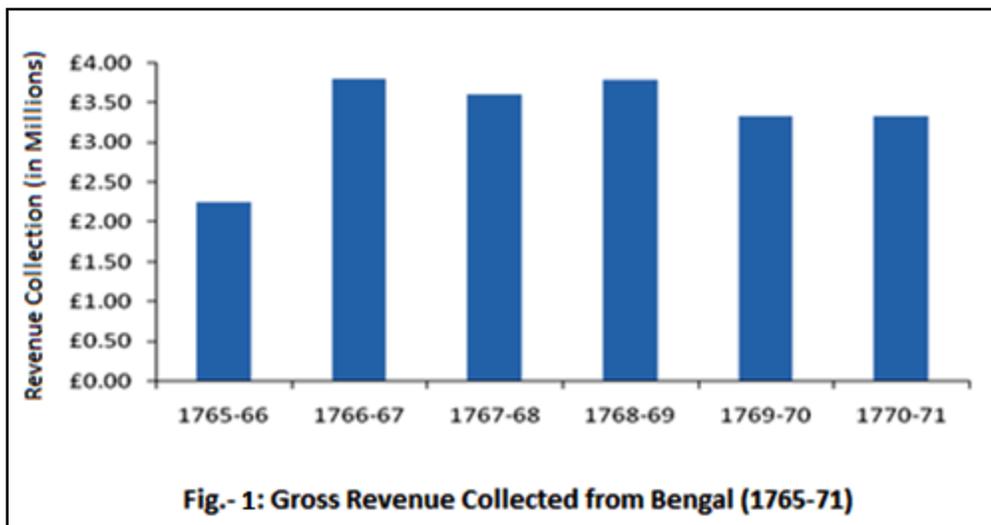
The recorded distraction in Bengal's history began from 1757, when East India Company defeated Siraj-ud Daulah and became the de-facto ruler of Bengal. Territorial rule by a commercial enterprise resulted in the commercialization of power and the effects of the British rule were extremely critical, both in political and economical structure. The Battle of Plassey, therefore, was not only a turning point in the history of Bengal but in the history of India. It has been aptly remarked that, "*the battle of Plassey marked the end of one epoch and the beginning of a new one.*" Historian R.C. Dutt appropriately narrates that, "*the people of Bengal had been used to tyranny, but had never lived under an oppression so far reaching in its effects, extending to every village market and every manufacturer's loom. They had been used to arbitrary acts from men in power, but had never suffered from a system which touched their trades, their occupation, and their lives so closely. The springs of their industry were stopped, the sources of their wealth dried up.*"

From the victory of Plassey, the British plundered Bengal and this plunder directly contributed to the industrial revolution in England. The British Parliamentary Select Committee was appointed to find out how Indian manufactures/goods could be replaced by British manufactures/goods. Simply, it was formulated to devise the mechanism through which British

industries could be promoted at the expense of Indian industries. This attitude hampered the prosperity of Bengal in two ways. Firstly, the wealth from Bengal was invested in the newly established industries in England, and secondly, the fall of demand of Bengal goods combined and caused the final ruin of Bengal. British goods were sold in India and Indian goods were gradually replaced. In 1813, by passing a character, the British Parliament decided that India should no longer be considered as an industrial nation but an agricultural nation. From onwards, the balance of trade remained in favour of British regime.

Bengal was hurt tremendously as it was a prominent exporting region of India up to eighteenth century. The British Company took raw materials from Bengal and sold industrial products from Britain back to the vast markets of India.⁷ To discourage Indian exports Indian goods were taxed heavily. For example, tax of 67.5% was levied on Indian calicos and a tax of 37.5% was levied on muslins on entry in markets of Britain. Similarly, over 300% import tax was placed on Indian sugar. More to this, in case of possession of Indian imported goods in England such as cotton and silk items were fined heavily to further destroy the Indian industry. Adam Smith referred to the unilateral flow of goods and treasurers of India to Britain as “*plunder*” and in the context referred, he said, the Court of Proprietors as “*the Court for the appointment of plunderers of India.*”

Under such barbaric environment, as imposed by the British company, Bengal which once one of the richest province of India, collapsed. It is estimated that by 1758 the English East India Company collected nearly 6 million pounds which was more than four times of the total land revenue collection of the Nawab of Bengal. Similarly, by 1771 the English East India Company exported approximately four million pounds worth of goods which was about 33% of the net revenue of Bengal. The inhuman tendency of the Company to collect lane revenue can be understood easily by having a glance on Fig. 1.



Conclusion

The modern period in the contents of Indian history is said to commence with the British rule in India. The foundation of the British rule in India was informally laid on 23rd June, 1757 when

⁷ The Muslin still caused a threat for sale of British fabric and so the weavers were forced to stop producing Muslin or passing on their skill to their children. To enforce this custom as a law the British administration adopted inhuman tactics. As a result, the muslin industry virtually disappeared.

the British had won the battlefield of Plassey by defeating the armed forces of the Nawab of Bengal. This straightforward victory was significant not only for the Company but was considerable for the whole of British Empire. The conquest of Bengal instilled in them a kind of hunger for the unfathomed wealth and its subsequent pillage. More to it, this triumph provided the British immense political power and by a single stroke they were raised to the status of a major contender for the Indian empire.

It is well said by the eminent Bengali poet Nabin Chandra Sen that the battle of Plassey was followed by a night of eternal gloom for India. Afterwards, the Company was granted unquestionable right to free trade in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It is mention worthy that these three states were the pockets of highest revenue collection which boosted the riches of English Company. This enabled them to organise a strong army and meet the cost of the conquest of the rest of the country.

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