

HIS-103: Emergence of East Bengal

Lecture 02

EIC Rule in India, Permanent Settlement Act & Sepoy Revolution of 1857



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EIC Rule in India

- The East India company's success in installing a puppet nawab on the Murshidabad *masnad* and ousting the French presence in Bengal had inaugurated informally the establishment of British political dominance in Bengal.
- In realizing their goal the company proceeded step by step. The 24-Parganas were obtained from the new Nawab as a gift to the company immediately after Palashi. In 1760, three large and resourceful districts of Bengal (Burdwan, Midnapur and Chittagong) were acquired.
- Later the victory in **Battle of Buxer** (Bihar) in 1764 consolidated the Company's power and forced **Emperor Shah Alam II** to appoint the EIC as the *diwan* or revenue collector of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The Company thus became the de facto ruler of large areas of the lower Gangetic plain by 1773.
- From 1765 to 1772, the company shared revenue of Bengal but took no responsibility in administering it. On behalf of the company, **Syed Muhammad Reza Khan** managed *Diwani* administration. This was the period when the company and its servants plundered the country's resources shamelessly.

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- The consequence was the collapse of the economy and also the law and order of the country. The **famine of 1769-70**, which decimated one-third of the Bengal population, was the consequence of the great damage. It also proceeded by degrees to expand its dominions around Bombay and Madras.
- The **Anglo-Mysore Wars** (1766–99) and the **Anglo-Maratha Wars** (1772–1818) left it in control of large areas of India south of the Sutlej River. With the defeat of the Marathas, no native power represented a threat for the Company any longer.
- The expansion of the Company's power chiefly took **two forms**. The **first** of these was the outright annexation of Indian states and subsequent direct governance of the underlying regions, which collectively came to comprise British India.
- The annexed regions included the North-Western Provinces (comprising Rohilkhand, Gorakhpur, and the Doab) (1801), Delhi (1803), Assam (Ahom Kingdom 1828), and Sindh (1843).

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- Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, and Kashmir, were annexed after the Anglo-Sikh Wars in 1849–56; however, Kashmir was immediately sold under the Treaty of Amritsar (1850) to the Dogra Dynasty of Jammu, and thereby became a princely state.
- In 1854 Berar was annexed, and the state of Oudh two years later.
- The **second form** of asserting power involved treaties in which Indian rulers acknowledged the Company's hegemony in return for limited internal autonomy. Since the Company operated under financial constraints, it had to set up political underpinnings for its rule.
- The most important such support came from the subsidiary alliances with Indian princes during the first 75 years of Company rule. In the early 19th century, the territories of these princes accounted for two-thirds of India.

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- ▶ When an Indian ruler, who was able to secure his territory, wanted to enter such an alliance, the Company welcomed it as an economical method of indirect rule, which did not involve the economic costs of direct administration or the political costs of gaining the support of alien subjects. In return, the Company undertook the "defense of these subordinate allies and treated them with traditional respect and marks of honor."
- ▶ Subsidiary alliances created the princely states, of the Hindu Maharajas and the Muslim Nawabs. Prominent among the princely states were: Cochin (1791), Jaipur (1794), Travancore (1795), Hyderabad (1798), Mysore (1799), Cis-Sutlej Hill States (1815), Central India Agency (1819), Cutch and Gujarat Gaikwad territories (1819), Rajputana (1818), and Bahawalpur (1833).
- ▶ The Bengal conquest by the company proved to be not only disastrous for Bengal, but also for the company itself. In a plundering mood the company and its servants became busier in enriching themselves like business of opium. Consequently, the Company was running at a loss, which used to declare huge dividend every year. The chronic losses forced the company to pray for a 'rescue loan' from government in 1771.

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- ▶ The political considerations led parliament to grant the loan and at the same time interfere into the affairs of the company by enacting the **Regulating Act, 1773**. This Act hinted at two parallel developments—gradual encroachment of government control on the company affairs and corresponding curtailment of power of the company until its complete abolition in 1858. The Regulating Act had defined how the affairs of the company including the governance of the new state had to be managed. Government reserved the right to interfere into the affairs of the company any time it felt necessary.
- ▶ A permanent parliamentary committee called **Board of Control** was set up to oversee the affairs of the company. The members of the court of directors were barred from receiving gifts and presents from cadets whom they nominated to become members of the Civil Service in Bengal. **Governor General Cornwallis**, was directly appointed by parliament with specific instructions to execute. Cornwallis, to the great disadvantage of the company, had formulated the mode of administration of the colonial state. Having private trade and receiving gifts and presents by officers were strictly banned.

Famine of 1770

- Within the first few years of its ability to tax, the Company doubled the total land tax; most of this revenue flowed back to English investors. As mentioned before, the consequence was the collapse of the economy, which resulted in the **famine of 1769-70**, which annihilated 10 million people—one-third of the Bengal population.
- The regions in which the famine occurred affected the modern Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal in particular, but the famine also extended into Orissa and Jharkhand as well as modern Bangladesh. Among the worst affected areas were Birbhum and Murshidabad in Bengal, and Tirhut, Champaran and Bettiah in Bihar.
- A partial shortfall in crops, considered nothing out of the ordinary, occurred in 1768 and was followed in late 1769 by much more severe conditions. By September 1769 after the failure of the annual South-East monsoon there was a severe drought, and alarming reports were coming in of rural distress. These were, however, largely ignored by company officers. Raids conducted by the Maratha bargis (bargir) mostly from Nagpur led to widespread theft and destruction and presumably reduced the region's ability to deal with the ensuing shortages. By early 1770 there was starvation, and by mid-1770 deaths from starvation were occurring on a large scale.

Permanent Settlement Act 1793

- The Permanent Settlement was a grand contract signed in 1793 between the government of the East India Company in Bengal and individual landholders of Bengal—zamindars and talukdars.
- Under the contract, the zamindars were admitted into the colonial state system as the absolute proprietors of landed property in Bengal. The government revenue payable to government was fixed permanently. The rules of the permanent settlement made every individual zamindar and talukdar the permanent and absolute proprietors of the land under their control.
- As absolute proprietors of land, zamindars and talukdars were required to pay revenue to government at a rate fixed permanently. But the cultivating raiyats were denied to such a privilege. The landholders were free to change the rent rate of their tenants. They even could evict their tenants if they wanted to. But if they defaulted, their lands proportionate to their default would be realized through public sale of their land. This strong law was called the Sun-set Law.

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- Under this law, land of the zamindars was liable to be sold if they failed to pay government revenue punctually. Under the operation of the Sun-set Law greater part of the zamindari lands of Bengal were sold through auction sales and their lands were transferred to new hands.
- The conclusion of the permanent settlement with zamindars had some immediate objectives in view. These may be classified as:
 - (a) placing revenue paying on a definite footing and making revenue collection sure and certain;
 - (b) ensuring a minimum revenue;
 - (c) relieving officials of revenue matter and engaging them to other spheres of administration; and finally,
 - (d) forging an alliance between the zamindar class and the colonial rulers.

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- Though not entirely but largely, government succeeded in achieving these short-term goals. The revenue paying agency was put on a definite footing in the person of zamindar. The government now knew how much was to be its annual inflow from land and the zamindars also knew for certain their contractual obligation to government.
- Formerly, neither the government nor the revenue payers knew exactly where did they stand as regards revenue collection and payment.
- Unfortunately, this act had an adverse effect on the relationship between zamindar and peasants. A series of peasant uprisings in most parts of Bengal, especially in eastern Bengal, from the late 1850s was the most direct manifestation of the estranged relationship between the zamindars and raiyats.
- The crisis was triggered off by the peasant uprisings in the Santal Pargana first (1855) and then in the indigo districts (1859-61). The indigo resistance movement continued from 1858 to 1860.

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- The peasant resistance movements took an alarming turn in the 1870s and early 1880s when the peasants in several parts of eastern Bengal made alliances among themselves to assert their rights in land and minimize extraction of surpluses by zamindars.
- The most remarkable of the peasant uprisings in this period were the Tushkhali (in Bakerganj) peasant movement (1872-75), Pabna peasant uprising (1873), Chhagalnaiya (Noakhali) peasant movement (1874), Mymensingh tribal peasant movement (1874-1882), Munshiganj (Dhaka) peasant movement (1880-81) and Mehendiganj (Bakerganj) uprising (1880-81).
- The Faraizis (a Muslim reformist sect) took up the peasants' cause and the Faraizi movement established extensive network across the country, particularly in south Bengal, against the zamindari control. A common demand of all these peasant alliances was the restoration of *raiya* rights in land

Sepoy Revolt 1857

- Sepoy Revolt, 1857 started at Barrackpur through Mangal Pandey on 29 March 1857. The pretext for revolt was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle. To load it, the sepoys had to bite off the ends of lubricated cartridges. A rumor spread among the sepoys that the grease used to lubricate the cartridges was a mixture of pigs' and cows' grease; thus, to have oral contact with it was an insult to both Muslims and Hindus.
- However, Mangal Pandey was executed in early April. Later in April sepoys at Meerut refused to use Enfield cartridges and as punishments they were given long prison terms, confined and put in jail. As a result, revolt spread other parts of India.
- It created serious tension throughout East Bengal. The resistance in Chittagong and Dhaka and skirmishes at Sylhet, Jessore, Rangpur, Pabna and Dinajpur had left East Bengal in a state of alert and excitement.
- On 18 November 1857, the Native Infantry of Chittagong rose in open rebellion and released all prisoners from the jail. They seized arms and ammunition, ransacked the treasury, set the Magazine House on fire and proceeded towards Tippera.

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- The offensive of the sepoy of Chittagong had an important bearing upon the company's defensive posture at Dhaka. The authorities sent three companies of the 54th Regiment and one hundred seamen to Dhaka. Simultaneously a Naval Brigade was sent to Jessore, Rangpur, Dinajpur and some other districts of East Bengal. Organized local volunteers consisting mostly of European residents took special measures for the protection of Dhaka.
- The situation became tense when the Naval Brigade arrived at Dhaka to disarm the sepoy stationed there. On 22 November, the sepoy stationed at Lalbagh resisted the process of disarming. In the skirmish that followed several sepoy were killed and arrested while many of them fled towards Mymensingh. Most of the fugitives were, however, arrested and put up for summary trial by a hurriedly constituted Court Martial. Of the accused sepoy 11 were sentenced to death and the rest were sentenced to life imprisonment. The judgement was executed rather hurriedly.

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- The role and reaction of various classes of people of East Bengal during the sepoy revolt present a gloomy picture. The landed aristocracy were decidedly opposed to the sepoys and some of them rendered logistic support to the Company authorities by supplying carts, carriages and elephants; informing the movements of the fleeing sepoys and finally organizing local volunteer corps to resist the sepoys.
- The government acknowledged such services of the landed aristocracy with thanks and subsequently awarded them titles of Nawab, Khan Bahadur, Khan Shaheb, Rai Bahadur, Rai Shaheb etc. and rewarded them with all sorts of worldly gains.
- Following the role displayed by the landed aristocracy, the middle class too sided with the Company's government. The common people and the peasantry as a whole were apathetic and remained untouched by the sepoy revolt, though they suffered much from the concomitant artificial price hike.