

The Colonial Era in India

In the previous chapter, we saw the Marathas considerably weaken the Mughal Empire, before they themselves succumbed to the British forces early in the 19th century. And yet, military campaigns were only one factor in India becoming the 'jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire—indeed, the empire's largest colony.

The Age of Colonialism

Before we get there, we must step back a little in time and consider the phenomenon of colonialism. Its usual definition is the practice where one country takes control of another region, establishing settlements there, and imposing its political, economic, and cultural systems. This is not a recent occurrence: colonialism can be traced to the time of the great empires in the 1st millennium BCE; in the 1st millennium CE, the spread of Christianity and Islam also involved the colonisation of the territories converted to the new faiths.

But the 'Age of Colonialism' usually refers to Europe's expansion from the 15th century onward, which, within a few centuries, extended to large parts of the world. As you will discover in higher grades, European powers—in particular, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and Netherlands—established colonies across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia and many Pacific islands, after conquering large parts of those regions of the world. Often, the conquests were achieved through military campaigns that involved the massacre or enslavement of native populations.

What impelled those nations to undertake such campaigns? Political competition between European powers created a race for territorial expansion and global influence. Territorial expansion had obvious economic advantages: access to new natural resources, new markets and new trade routes—and, often, plunder, as we will see. Converting indigenous populations to Christianity was another powerful motivation. A lesser one, but significant nonetheless, was scientific inquiry—the desire to explore unknown lands so as to accumulate knowledge of the planet's geography and natural history.

While colonisers often claimed they had the 'civilising mission' of bringing 'progress' to the colonised peoples, who were often demonised as 'savage', 'primitive' or 'barbaric', the reality was very different: loss of independence, exploitation of resources by the colonisers, the destruction of traditional ways of life, and the imposition of foreign cultural values.

Europeans in India

India traded with the Greeks and the Romans over two millennia ago. Indian goods—spices, cotton, ivory, gems, sandalwood, teakwood, wootz steel, among other commodities—were highly sought after in the Mediterranean world. Until the 16th century CE, when European powers began sailing to the Indian Subcontinent, India was a vibrant economic and cultural powerhouse. Historical estimates (by economist Angus Maddison, in particular) suggest that India contributed at least one-fourth of the world GDP during this whole period, making it one of the two largest economies globally alongside China (whose contribution was of the same order). It is remarkable that from the 16th century onward, many European travellers to India described her as 'flourishing' and noted her manufacturing capabilities, diverse agricultural output, and extensive internal as well as external trading networks. However, this economic prosperity also made India an attractive target for European colonial ambitions.

The Portuguese: commerce and atrocities

The Portuguese explorer and navigator Vasco da Gama's arrival at Kappad (near Kozhikode in Kerala) in May 1498 paved the way for the beginning of European colonisation in India.

Though he was well received, his aggressive ways failed to establish friendly relations with the local rulers. During his second voyage four years later, he seized, tortured and killed Indian merchants, and bombarded Calicut from the sea. The Portuguese captured strategic ports, including Goa (in 1510), which became the capital of their colony in India, as well as several trading posts along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts.

The Portuguese implemented a system known as cartaz (pass), requiring all ships in the Arabian Sea to purchase Portuguese permits for navigation. Ships without these permits were seized. This naval dominance allowed them to monopolise the spice trade between India and Europe for nearly a century.

The Dutch: commerce and competition

The Dutch arrived in India in the early 17th century and, unlike the Portuguese, focused primarily on commercial dominance, particularly in the spice trade. They established a Dutch East India Company, with trading posts in various parts of India, including, on the west coast, Surat, Bharuch, Cochin (Kochi), and on the east coast Nagapattinam and Masulipatnam (presentday Machilipatnam). Their most significant presence was in the Malabar region of Kerala, where they displaced the Portuguese from several trading centres.

The Dutch presence in India was ultimately limited; it declined significantly after their defeat at the Battle of Colachel in 1741, where the forces of Travancore under King Marthanda Varma decisively defeated the Dutch both on land and at sea (the Travancore kingdom was in the southern part of presentday Kerala). This battle was a rare instance of an Asian power successfully repelling a European colonial force.



Fig. A depiction of the surrender of Dutch forces to King Marthanda Varma of Travancore after the Battle of Colachel. 1741 CF (Padmanahhanuram Palace).

‘The French: colonial ambitions

The French entered India later, establishing their first trading post at Surat in 1668 and subsequently at Pondicherry (presentday Puducherry) in 1674, where they established their East India Company (Compagnie des Indes Orientales) and developed ambitious plans to establish a French empire in India.

Dupleix, who served as Governor-General of French India from 1742 to 1754, pioneered several colonial strategies that would later be adopted by the British. In particular, he trained Indian soldiers in European military techniques, creating disciplined infantry soldiers known as sepoys. Dupleix also developed the strategy of indirect rule through puppet Indian rulers, who were installed through interventions in local succession disputes.

Like the Dutch, and unlike the Portuguese, the French colonial powers did not much intervene in Indians' social and religious life. A rare exception was the destruction in 1748 of Pondicherry's large Vedapurishwaran temple, ordered by Dupleix on the persistent request of Pondicherry's Jesuit priests and Dupleix's own wife, with a view to asserting the dominance of Christianity. Generally, however, the French had to be content with a modest amount of trade with India.

ENTER THE BRITISH

Britain dominated the Indian subcontinent for nearly two centuries. How did this happen? Many books have dissected the methods of the British rulers; we will not attempt to tell a complete story, but will focus on the main aspects of their colonial presence in India.

From traders to rulers

The English East India Company was established as a trading company and was granted a royal charter by Queen Elizabeth I, which gave it special powers-to raise a private army, for instance. Nevertheless, its agents initially kept up a pretence of being mere traders, which allowed them, in the 17th century, to establish footholds along India's coast with minimal resistance: Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta among the first. Local rulers did not mind these trading posts, as they generally welcomed foreign trade (which, let us recall, was a longstanding practice in India). These modest beginnings concealed the Company's longterm ambitions.

The strategy of 'divide and rule'

While maintaining an appearance of traders, the Company's agents cultivated political relationships with local rulers, offering military support to some against their rivals, thus inserting themselves into Indian political conflicts and emerging as power brokers rather than foreign invaders. They would also play on rivalries between regional rulers or succession disputes within ruling houses, so as to benefit from these conflicts-the 'divide and rule' policy. The British were equally skilled at exploiting existing divisions within Indian society: they identified and often encouraged tensions between religious communities, for instance. The Battle of Plassey (1757) exemplifies this approach. When tensions arose between Siraj-ud-daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, and the East India Company officials led by Robert Clive, the latter identified disgruntled elements within the Nawab's court. Clive hatched a conspiracy with Mir Jafar, the Nawab's military commander, promising to install him as the new Nawab in exchange for his betrayal. The battle took place at Palashi (Plassey as the British spelt it), some 150 kilometres north of present-day Kolkata. Some French forces assisted the Nawab, but Mir Jafar's forces-constituting the majority of the Nawab's army-stood aside, ensuring a British victory despite their smaller number. Even today, 'Mir Jafar' in India remains a synonym for 'traitor'!

By positioning themselves as a kingmaker, the East India Company gradually established control over increasingly large territories. In the 19th century, it went a step further and introduced the infamous Doctrine of Lapse, according to which any princely state would be annexed if its ruler died without a natural male heir. This deliberately disregarded the Hindu tradition of adoption, which was a legitimate means of succession in Indian royal houses.

The Doctrine of Lapse led to the annexation of numerous states, contributing to the expansion of the territorial control of the British. This created much resentment in sections of Indian society and contributed to the 1857 Rebellion (to which we return below).

Another stratagem (known as 'subsidiary alliance') was to install a British 'Resident' in the courts of Indian rulers to protect them against internal or external threats; in exchange, they would have to maintain British troops at their own expense and conduct foreign relations only through the British. While appearing to preserve the sovereignty of princely states, the system effectively transferred real power to the British while burdening Indian rulers with the costs of their own subjugation! The ruler of Hyderabad was among the first to enter such an alliance in 1798 ; several others soon followed.

From Paradise to Hell?**Devastating famines**

A few years after its victory at Plassey, the East India Company secured the right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha-some of India's richest regions. Clive described Bengal in particular as 'the paradise of the earth'. The Company's agents extracted maximum revenue while investing minimally in governance or development, with devastating consequences for the population.

In 1770-1772, coming on top of two years of crop failure, the harsh revenue collection targets imposed by the East India Company in Bengal-requiring farmers to pay a high rate of cash taxes on the produce of their lands, regardless of harvest conditions-caused a catastrophic famine which killed nearly one-third of its population or an estimated 10 million people.

We should note that famines in India had occurred throughout history, caused by droughts, floods, military campaigns and other factors, but never on such a scale. During the colonial era, India, especially rural India, sank into deep poverty and never recovered.

The drain of India's wealth

As we saw earlier, economic exploitation of India formed the foundation of British colonial policy. In 1895, the U.S. historian and political scientist Brooks Adams noted:

In other words, according to Adams, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which required much investment, was made possible at least partly by the 'stolen wealth from India' (this phrase is by the U.S. historian Will Durant).

Taking his cue from scholars such as Adams and Digby, Dadabhai Naoroji, a respected political figure, authored in 1901 *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, in which he compiled from British reports the wealth estimated to have been drained out of India. About the same time, Romesh Chunder Dutt, a historian, did a similar exercise in his *Economic History of India*. All these studies showed that the colonisers had extracted many billions of pounds from India. A more recent estimate (by Utsa Patnaik) for the period 1765 to 1938 comes to 45 trillion U.S. dollars (in today's value), or about 13 times Britain's GDP in 2023! This was extracted not just through taxes, but by charging Indians for the colonial power's expenditures on building the railways, the telegraph network, and even on wars!



Fig. Brooks Adams Fig. William Digby Fig. Dadabhai Naoroji Fig. R.C. Dutt

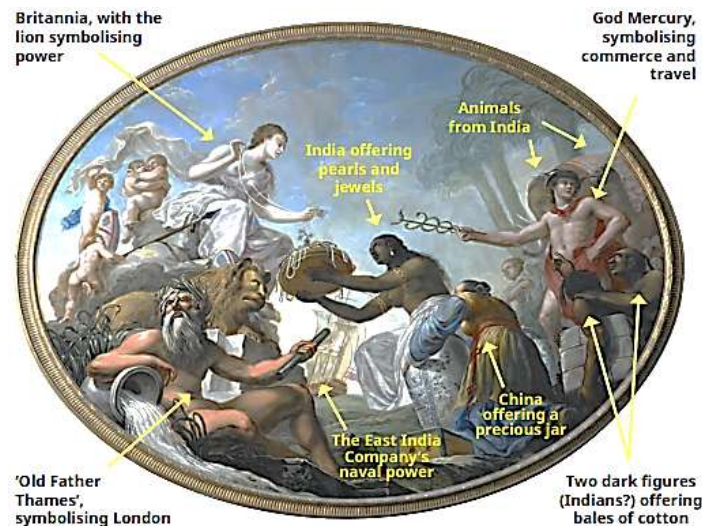


Fig. 'The East offering its riches to Britannia'-making sense of the painting's symbolism

Decline of India's indigenous industries

Before the 18th century, India was renowned for its manufacturing capabilities, particularly in textiles-cotton, silk, wool, jute, hemp and coir being the chief ones. Indian cotton textiles, in particular, with rich and intricate designs, bright colours, and textures ranging from ultra-thin muslins to richly embossed fabrics were in high demand in many parts of the world.

British policy imposed heavy duties on Indian textiles imported into Britain while forcing India to accept British manufactured goods with minimal tariffs. Moreover, Britain now controlled most of the sea trade as well as exchange rates, so Indian traders found it difficult to export as earlier. The result was the ruin of Indian textile industry. In the 19th century, India's textile exports fell sharply, while Britain's imports into India grew even more sharply. Communities of skilled artisans who had practised their craft for generations were reduced to poverty and forced to return to subsistence agriculture on increasingly overtaxed land. As William Bentinck, then Governor-General of India, observed in 1834, "The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

Dismantling traditional governance structures

The British systematically dismantled these indigenous governance systems, replacing them with a centralised bureaucracy designed primarily to facilitate tax collection and maintain order, rather than promote public welfare. This transformation destroyed centuries-old mechanisms of community decision-making.

The introduction of British codes of law disregarded customary laws and practices that had governed Indian communities for generations. While presented as modernisation, this imposition of a foreign system unsuited to India alienated ordinary Indians from the judicial system, creating courts that were expensive, time-consuming, and conducted in a foreign language.

Transforming Indian education: creating 'brown Englishmen'

Education became a powerful tool for the creation of a class of Indians who would serve British interests. In earlier centuries, India had diverse educational traditions—paṭhaśhālās, madrasās, vihāras, and many forms of apprenticeship learning. These institutions transmitted not only practical knowledge but also cultural values and traditions.

A sharp turning point in India's educational history was marked by the notorious 1835 'Minute on Indian Education' of British historian and politician, Thomas B. Macaulay. In it, although he admitted that he had "no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic," he expressed his conviction that European knowledge was vastly superior to India's: "I have never found one among them [Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Indians, therefore needed British education, whose objective would be to create a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

Although a few prominent British Orientalists argued that Indian students should be left to study in their own languages, Macaulay's policy gained the upper hand and India's traditional schools slowly disappeared, while English became a language of prestige associated with the colonial masters, resulting in lasting divisions in Indian society between English-educated elites and the masses.

The new education system served multiple colonial objectives. It created a pool of Indian clerks and minor officials who could staff the lower ranks of the colonial administration at a fraction of the cost of British personnel. It also sidelined traditional sources of knowledge and authority, creating generations of Indians disconnected from their own cultural heritage.

Reshaping economic structures to serve imperial needs

The British transformed India's economy from a self-sufficient agricultural system supplemented by craft and manufacture production into a supplier of raw materials for British industry and a market forced to buy British goods. Without going into the technical details of this economic transformation, let us take the example of the construction of India's vast railway network, often cited as a colonial blessing. While the railways did bring people closer together and integrated India's internal market, it was designed primarily to move raw materials from the interior to ports for export and to distribute British manufactured goods throughout India. Railway routes largely ignored existing trade patterns to serve colonial economic interests. Another purpose was to move armies quickly from their cantonments if they had to fight a distant rebellion or war.

Early Resistance Movements:

Challenging Colonial Authority

India was such an enormous source of wealth, natural and human resources for the British that they nicknamed her 'the jewel in the crown of the British Empire'. And they asserted that India would forever remain part of the British Empire, "on which the sun never sets."

The 'Sannyasi-Fakir rebellion'

One of the earliest organised resistance movements, often called the 'the Sannyasi (or Sannyasi-Fakir) Rebellion', began in Bengal after the terrible famine of 1770. Groups of sannyasis (Hindu ascetics) and fakirs (Muslim ascetics), who traditionally travelled freely for pilgrimage and charity, found their movements restricted by the British East India Company policies, especially by the new land and taxation policies. The precise motivations of the sannyasis and fakirs have been debated, but over the next three decades they attacked British treasuries and tax collectors. The British called them 'bandits', executed some of them and used their superior forces to eventually defeat them. This rebellion later inspired the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882); it contained the song 'Vande Mātaram', which would inspire Indians during the struggle for freedom in the early 20th century and, after Independence, became India's national song.

Tribal uprisings

India's tribal communities faced unique threats as the British expanded into forests and hills, disrupting their traditional way of life. The British described tribals as 'primitive', restricted their access to forests and forest produce, sometimes acquiring tribal land or turning it into private property, imposing cash taxes, catching tribals in debt traps, replacing traditional tribal councils with the British legal system and encouraging missionaries to 'civilise' and convert tribals to Christianity. Besides, a colonial law categorised hundreds of tribal communities as 'criminal tribes', causing them to be unjustly harassed for decades.

Some of the above abuse led some tribes to rise in rebellion against the colonial power. Among the first such events, the Kol Uprising (1831-1832) in Chota Nagpur (in present-day Jharkhand) started when the British introduced land policies that favoured outsiders over the original tribal inhabitants. The Kol tribes (which included the Mundas and Oraons, among others) temporarily established their control over significant territory before being defeated by the British forces. The Santhal Rebellion of 1855-1856, a widespread uprising of the Santhal people across parts of present-day Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal, was led by two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, and rebelled against moneylenders and landlords who were taking away their ancestral lands with British support. The Santhals declared their own government and vowed to 'fight to the last drop of blood'. The British response was brutal; after some initial losses, they burned entire villages and killed thousands of Santhals, including, eventually, the rebel leaders. However, the daring Santhal rebellion inspired other tribal communities to resist colonial rule.

Peasant uprisings against economic exploitation

Even without famines, peasants suffered under the unfair British revenue collections, often losing their lands to moneylenders or new landlords. The Indigo Revolt (1859-1862) illustrates this exploitation. European planters forced peasants in the northern parts of Bengal to abandon food crops and, instead, grow indigo plants, as the indigo dye was then in great demand in Europe. From planters to traders, everyone earned huge profits - except the peasants, who were so poorly paid that they got trapped in debt slavery. When they refused to grow indigo, they faced imprisonment, torture, and destruction of their property. Their uprising was directed mostly at the planters, who retaliated by hiring mercenaries to attack the peasants. Their cause was supported by educated Bengalis and the Bengali press; the British authorities were eventually forced to restrict some of the worst abuses.

The Great Rebellion of 1857

The British called it the 'Sepoy Mutiny'. 'Sepoys', let us recall, were the Indian soldiers enrolled in the East India company's British Army; its officers, of course, were almost all British. After India's Independence, historians rejected the term 'Sepoy Mutiny', proposing a few others instead; following many scholars, we will call the event the 'Great Rebellion of 1857'. But what exactly happened?

Even earlier, there were several signs of severe discontent among the sepoys, beginning with the so-called 'Vellore Mutiny' of 1806, which erupted when the British introduced new uniform regulations that violated the religious practices of both Hindu and Muslim sepoys. For example, they were forbidden from wearing religious marks on their foreheads and were required to shave their beards. The sepoys seized the Vellore fort (in present-day Tamil Nadu) and killed many British officers and troops; the British however crushed the revolt, killing or executing hundreds of sepoys.

We should also keep in mind that most sepoys were from agricultural families, which had been suffering great hardship owing to the British policies on land revenue. After decades of increasing frustration, in 1857 rumours spread across northern and central India that rifle cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat, offending the Hindu and Muslim sepoys' religious sensibilities. At Barrackpore (in present-day West Bengal), the sepoy Mangal Pandey attacked British officers. His execution spread further discontent among the sepoys. In Meerut (in present-day Uttar Pradesh), some of them killed their British officers and marched to nearby Delhi, where they proclaimed the elderly but politically powerless Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as their leader (his 'empire' was limited to a small area in Delhi).

The uprising failed, but it marked a turning point, especially in sowing a seed for the idea that foreign domination was unacceptable. The seed would grow early in the 20th century into a full-fledged struggle for freedom, though with different methods. Meantime, in 1858, the British Crown took direct control of India from the East India Company, initiating the period of the British Raj. British policies shifted from aggressive territorial expansion to consolidation of control. The Indian Army was reorganised so as to prevent unified resistance in the future.

The legacy of European Colonialism in india

The European (mostly British) conquest and rule of India was not a 'civilising mission'-India's own civilisation was much older than Europe's. It was a process of subjugation and exploitation executed systematically, with brutal repression if necessary. Except for a small Indian elite who accepted British rule as inevitable, the Indians suffered the fate of many of the world's colonised populations: abuse, exploitation, violence and uprooting.

At the same time, the colonial rule had some largely unintended consequences. It opened (or re-opened) India to the world and the world to India. The British (and the French to a much smaller extent) were systematic in documenting every aspect of their conquest, from its geography (they conducted meticulous surveys of the Subcontinent). They created impressive lists of all ethnic groups, although the lists were flawed because of the unscientific but prevalent notions of 'race' (as genetics has shown, 'races' do not exist). They also documented India's monuments, studying their art and architecture, restoring some of the ruined ones, and initiating the discipline of archaeology. But in the process, they (and other colonial powers) stole thousands of statues, paintings, jewels, manuscripts and other cultural artefacts from India and sent them to European museums or private collections. While this represented a profound cultural loss and violation of India's heritage, it also promoted some appreciation of Indian art in the European public. Such massive theft took place over much of the colonised world; today, there are ongoing debates and efforts to repatriate some of these cultural treasures to their countries of origin.

Two heroines

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi fought bravely to save her kingdom from British annexation; assisted by the Maratha Tatia (or Tantia) Tope, Nana Saheb's military adviser, Rani Lakshmibai managed to escape a besieged Jhansi and to conquer the Gwalior fort, seizing the treasury and the arsenal. She was killed on 18 June 1858 on the battlefield. The British army officer who commanded the attack on Jhansi noted that the Rani was "remarkable for her beauty, cleverness, perseverance [and] generosity to her subordinates. These qualities, combined with her rank, rendered her most dangerous of all the rebel leaders. ... [She was the] best and bravest of the rebels." Tatia Tope continued fighting until early 1859 but was betrayed and handed over to the British, who hanged him.

Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh (northcentral portion of Uttar Pradesh) also resisted the British-led resistance after her kingdom was annexed and joined the rebels during the 1857 uprising, leading the defence of Lucknow when the British attempted to recapture the city. She rejected British offers of safe passage if she surrendered and ultimately had to take refuge in nearby Nepal. In November 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation marking the end of the East India Company's rule in India; she promised non-interference in religious matters and greater inclusion of Indians in the administration. Begum Hazrat Mahal issued a counter-proclamation, warning Indians not to trust such assurances, as "it is the unvarying custom of the English never to forgive a fault be it great or small."

Let's recall

- The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British were attracted to India primarily because of her great wealth. They fought among themselves for dominance of the Subcontinent, with the British gaining the upper hand.
- The British ruthless taxation policy inflicted great misery on the people, causing severe famines in particular and millions of deaths. The deliberate deindustrialization of India devastated her once-thriving manufacturing sector.
- Gradually, the British imposed their administrative structures, legal systems and educational institutions to ensure total colonial control over the Indian society.
- The Portuguese focused on religious conversion and cultural transformation in Goa created long-lasting social divisions. The French policy of assimilation created a small elite of culturally French Indians in Pondicherry.
- Several uprisings took place from the late 18th century onward, with the Great Rebellion of 1857 threatening the colonial rule for a while. Most of these uprisings were brutally repressed.
- In the 19th century, India's classical culture (in particular through translated Sanskrit texts) flowed back to the West, creating a lasting influence.