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British Conquest for Bengal: Battles of Plassey and Buxar

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Bengal in the 17th-18th Century

- **In Mughal Period:** Bengal was the **most fertile and the richest province** of the Mughal Empire and included present day **Bangladesh** and states of **Bihar** and **Odisha**.

The authoritative powers of the province lay in the hands of the **Nawab of Bengal**.
- **Economic Importance:** Bengal held economic importance for its famous textiles, silk and saltpetre.

Exports from Bengal to Europe consisted of saltpetre, rice, indigo, pepper, sugar, silk, cotton textiles, handicrafts, etc.
- **Importance for the British:** Bengal became the first kingdom to be occupied by the British in India. The East India Company carried on profitable trade with this province.
 - The enormous resources of Bengal came in handy for financing the British expansion.

Nearly 60% of the British imports from Asia consisted of goods from Bengal.
 - The British East India company laid the foundation of Calcutta and established British commercial settlement in the 1690s.
 - The Company paid a sum of Rs 3,000 (£ 350) per annum to the Mughal emperor who allowed them to trade freely in Bengal.

In contrast, the **Company's exports from Bengal were worth more than £ 50,000 per annum.**

- **Conflicts among Nawabs and the British:** The special privileges enjoyed by the British Company was strongly opposed by the Nawabs of Bengal as it meant a huge loss to the provincial exchequer.
 - Consequently, the friction between the British commercial interests and the Bengal government became the chief cause for conflict between the two.
 - As a result, the British felt a need for a “puppet” as the Nawab on the throne of Bengal to willingly give them trade concessions and other privileges and establish their indirect but ultimate power in the province.

Battle of Plassey

The Battle of Plassey was fought in 1757 in the **Plassey (or Palashi) region of West Bengal**, on the east of Bhagirathi river.

Troops of the British East India Company, led by Robert Clive, came up against the forces of Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, and his French allies.

Background

- **Siraj-ud-Daulah:** The then Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah succeeded his grandfather Alavardi Khan after his death.
 - Alavardi Khan was the Deputy Governor of Bihar who assumed the throne after killing Sarfaraz Khan, an incapable son of Murshiq Quli Khan, Dewan of Bengal.
 - Siraj-ud-Daulah was surrounded by a number of rivals in his own court who helped the British in winning the Battle of Plassey.
- **Events Preceding the Battle:** The **British victory in the Carnatic** had already made Siraj apprehensive of the growing power of the East India Company.
 - Moreover, the officials of the Company made rampant misuse of its trade privileges that adversely affected the nawab’s finances.
 - The British also fortified Calcutta without the nawab’s permission which the nawab took as an ignorance to his sovereign power.

The infuriated Nawab marched to Calcutta and occupied Fort William in June 1756.
 - Shortly after Fort William's surrender, on June 20, 175, Siraj confined 146 British prisoners in a small dungeon in Calcutta, out of which 123 prisoners died of suffocation. It is infamously known as the ‘**Black Hole of Calcutta**’.

This event brought the hostility of the British in the open.

The Battle

- **Arrival of Robert Clive:** Following this tragic defeat of British by the Nawab of Bengal, a strong force under Robert Clive was sent from Madras to overthrow nawab and strengthen the British position in Bengal.
 - The discontented followers of the Nawab, such as Mir Jafar and other Bengali generals, were bribed to forge an alliance with the British.
 - Mir Jafar, a kin of Siraj was promised the throne in return for supporting the British.
- **Course of War:** Clive's army was confronted by the nawab's army at Plassey (Palashi) along with the French soldiers on their side.
 - The nawab's army of 50,000 soldiers outnumbered Clive's force of just 3000.
 - However, the **secret alliance of the British with the conspirators strengthened the British foothold** in the battle.
 - Moreover, **Mir Jafar, with around one-third of the Bengali army, did not join the battle** and contributed to Nawab's defeat.
 - Under compelling circumstances, the **Nawab tried to escape with his army but was killed** by Miran, the son of Mir Jafar.
- **Significance:** The Battle is regarding a **historic turning point for British in India**; it established political and military supremacy of the British in Bengal.

Post War

- After the Battle of Plassey Clive proclaimed Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Bengal and placed him on the throne of Murshidabad.
 - Mir Jafar in order to satisfy the British as per the agreement gave the Zamindari of 24 Parganas (group of villages) of Bengal to the company.
- However, this could not satisfy the British and consequently he was removed from the throne and his son-in-law **Mir Kasim was placed on the throne as the new Nawab of Bengal.**

Battle of Buxar

The Battle of Buxar was fought between the forces under the command of the British East India Company, led by **Hector Munro**, and the combined armies of **Mir Qasim**, Nawab of Bengal till 1763; **Shuja-ud-Daulah**, the Nawab of Awadh; and the Mughal Emperor **Shah Alam II**.

Background

- **Mir Qasim:** He was the **ablest among all the successors of Alavardi Khan**.
 - Mir Qasim, an efficient and strong ruler, determined to improve the affairs of the state and **shifted his capital from Murshidabad to Munger (Bihar) in 1762**.
 - He realized the importance of a full treasury and an efficient army required to maintain his independence.
 - Mir Qasim **regarded himself as an independent ruler** which was a problem for the British as they wanted him to be a puppet in their hands.
- **Tussle between Mir Qasim and the British:** Due to the misuse of the Farman of 1717 by the British to evade internal custom duties, Mir Qasim took the extreme step of **abolishing all duties on internal trade and benefitting his own subjects** by giving them the concession that the British had forcefully snatched.
 - This was **strongly protested by the British** and a preferential treatment over other traders was demanded.
 - These conflicts over transit duty **led to the outbreak of wars** between the British and Mir Kasim in 1763 which resulted in **British victories at Katwa, Murshidabad, Giria, Sooty and Munger**.
 - Mir Kasim fled to Oudh (Awadh) and **formed a confederacy** with the Nawab of Awadh, Shuja-ud-daulah, and the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II, with a view to recover Bengal from the British.

The Battle

- **Course of War:** In October 1764, in a final attempt to oust the British from Bengal, the combined armies of Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Awadh and Shah Alam II came together to fight against the former.

The armies of Nawabs and the Mughal emperor were decisively defeated by the British forces under **Major Hector Munro at Buxar**.
- **Result:** This decisive battle **confirmed British power over Bengal** and marked the **end of the attempt to rule Bengal through a puppet nawab**.

The battle resulted in the **Treaty of Allahabad, 1765** in which the **Mughal Emperor surrendered sovereignty of Bengal** to the British.

Lord Robert Clive, the victor at the Plassey, became the **first governor of Bengal**.
- **Significance:** Unlike the battle of Plassey which was more of British conspiracy, the battle of buxar was a **full-fledged war** which established the British prowess in warfare.
 - The importance of this battle lay in the fact that not only the Nawab of Bengal but also the **Mughal Emperor of India was defeated by the British**.
 - The victory made the British, a great power in northern India and **contenders for supremacy over the whole country**.

Post War

- After the battle, Mir Jafar was reinstated as the Nawab of Bengal in 1763.
He agreed to hand over the districts of Midnapore, Burdwan and Chittagong to the British for the maintenance of their army.
- The British were also permitted duty-free trade in Bengal, except for a duty of 2% on salt.
- He died in 1765 and was succeeded by his son Najm-ud-Daulah. However, the real power of administration still remained with the British.
 - Najm-ud-Daulah signed a treaty with the Company and became a **titled pensioner** on fifty-three lakhs of rupees per year which was reduced with every new successor.
 - In 1772, the British completely ended the pensions and **took over the direct charge of Bengal**.

Treaty of Allahabad, 1765

- In 1765, two Treaties were concluded by Robert Clive at Allahabad with Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah and Emperor Shah Alam II.
- **Under the first treaty with the Nawab of Awadh:**
 - **Allahabad and Kara were surrendered by the Nawab to Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II.**
 - A sum of Rs 50 lakh was paid to the Company as war indemnity.
 - Balwant Singh, the Zamindar of Banaras, was given full possession of his estate.
- **Under the second treaty with Shah Alam II:**
 - The emperor was asked to reside at Allahabad under the Company's protection.
 - The **Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were granted to the East India Company** in lieu of an annual payment of Rs 26 lakh
 - An amount of Rs 53 lakh was to be given by the Mughal Emperor to the Company in return for nizamat functions (military defence, police, and administration of justice) of the said provinces.

Note:

The major difference in the significance of the Carnatic Wars (1740-48, 1749-53 and 1758-63), Battle of Plassey (1757) and Battle of Buxar (1764) is:

- The **Carnatic Wars established British supremacy in trade** in India.
- The **Battle of Plassey laid the foundation of British Empire** in India.
- The **Battle of Buxar established the British as masters of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa** and made them a **great power of Northern India** and **contenders for the supremacy of the whole country**.