

Subject & course: History, B. A. Part-III

Paper: V, History of India (1206-1764)

Topic: Battle of Plassey & Buxar

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The beginnings of British political power over India may be traced to the battle of Plassey in 1757, when the English East India Company's forces defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal. The earlier British struggle with the French in South India had been but a dress rehearsal. The lessons learnt there were profitably applied in Bengal.

Causes of the Battle of Plassey

Misuses of the Passes or Dastaks by the Company: Bengal was the most fertile and the richest of India's provinces. Its industries and commerce were well developed. The East India Company and its servants had highly profitable trading interests in the province. The Company had secured valuable privileges in 1717 under a royal *farman* by the Mughal Emperor, which had granted the Company the freedom to export and import their goods in Bengal without paying taxes and the right to issue passes or *dastaks* for the movement of such goods. The Company's servants were also permitted to trade but were not covered by this *farman*. They were required to pay the same taxes as Indian merchants. This *farman* was a source of conflict between the Company and the Nawabs of Bengal. For one, it meant loss of revenue to the Bengal Government. Secondly, the power to issue *dastaks* for the Company's goods was misused by the Company's servants to evade taxes on their private trade. All the Nawabs of Bengal, from Murshid Quli Khan to Alivardi Khan, had objected to the English interpretation of the *farman* of 1717. They had compelled the Company to pay lump sums to their treasury, and firmly suppressed the misuse of *dastaks*. The Company had been compelled to accept the authority of the Nawabs in the matter, but its servants had taken every opportunity to evade and defy this authority.

Defying the orders of Nawab by the Company: Matters came to a head in 1756 when the young and quick-tempered Siraj-ud-Daulah succeeded his grandfather, Alivardi Khan. He demanded of the English that they should trade on the same basis as in the times of Murshid Quli Khan. The English refused to comply as they felt strong after their victory over the French in South India. They had also come to recognize the political and military weakness of Indian states. Instead of agreeing to pay taxes on their goods to the Nawab, they levied heavy duties on Indian goods entering Calcutta which was under their control. All this naturally annoyed and angered the young Nawab who also suspected that the Company was hostile to him and was favouring his rivals for the throne of Bengal. The breaking point came when, without taking the Nawab's permission, the Company began to fortify Calcutta in expectation of the coming struggle with the French, who were stationed at this time at Chandernagar. Siraj rightly interpreted this action as an attack upon his sovereignty. How could an independent ruler

permit a private company of merchants to build forts or to carry on private wars on his land? Moreover he feared that if he permitted the English and the French to fight each other on the soil of Bengal, he too would meet the fate of the Carnatic Nawabs. In other words, Siraj, was willing to let the Europeans remain, as merchant but not as masters. He ordered both the English and the French to demolish their fortifications at Calcutta and Chandernagar and to desist from fighting each other. While the French Company obeyed his order, the English Company refused to do so. Nevertheless the English Company demanded the absolute right to trade freely in Bengal irrespective of the Bengal Nawab's orders. This amounted to a direct challenge to the Nawab's sovereignty. No ruler could possibly accept this position. Siraj-ud-Daulah had the statesmanship to see the long-term implications of the English designs. He decided to make them obey the laws of the land.

Attack on Kasim Bazar & Fort William by the Nawab: Acting with great energy but with undue haste and inadequate preparation, Siraj-ud-Daulah seized the English factory at Kasimbazar, marched on to Calcutta, and occupied the Fort William on 20 June 1756. He then retired, from Calcutta to celebrate his easy victory, letting the English escape with their ships, This was a mistake for he had underestimated the strength of his enemy.

Conspiracy against the Nawab by the Company: The English officials took refuge at Fulta near the sea protected by their naval superiority. Here they waited for aid from Madras and, in the meantime, organised a web of intrigue and treachery with the leading men of the Nawab's court. Chief among these were Mir Jafar, the *Mir Bakshi*, Manick Chand, the Officer-in-Charge of Calcutta, Amichand, a rich merchant, Jagat Seth, the biggest banker of Bengal, and Khadim Khan, who commanded a large number of the Nawab's troops. From Madras came a strong naval and military force under Admiral Watson and Colonel Clive. Clive reconquered Calcutta in the beginning of 1757 and compelled the Nawab to concede all the demands of the English.

The Battle of Plassey: The English, however, were not satisfied, they were aiming high. They had decided to instal a more pliant tool in Siraj-ud-Daulah's place. Having joined a conspiracy organised by the enemies of the young Nawab to place Mir Jafar on the throne of Bengal, they presented the youthful Nawab with an impossible set of demands. Both sides realised that a war to the finish would have to be fought between them. They met for battle on the field of Plassey, 20 miles from Murshidabad, on 23 June 1757. The fateful battle of Plassey Was a battle only in name. In all, the English lost 29 men while the Nawab lost nearly 500. The major part of the Nawab's army, led by the traitors Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh, took no part in the fighting. Only a small group of the Nawab's soldiers led by Mir Madan and Mohan Lal fought bravely and well. The Nawab was forced to flee and was captured and put to death by Mir Jafar's son Miran. The battle of Plassey was followed, in the words of the Bengali poet Nabin Chandra Sen, by a night of eternal gloom for India.

Impact of the Battle of Plassey: The English proclaimed Mir Jafar the Nawab of Bengal and set out to gather the reward. The Company was granted undisputed right to free trade in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It also received the zamindari of the 24 Parganas near Calcutta. Mir Jafar paid a sum of Rs. 17,700,000 as compensation for the attack on Calcutta to the Company and the traders of the city. In addition, he paid large sums as gifts or bribes to the high officials of the Company. Clive, for example, received over two million rupees, Watts over one million. Clive later estimated that the Company and its servants had collected more than 30million rupees from the puppet Nawab. Moreover, it was understood that British merchants and officials would no longer be asked to pay any taxes on their private trade.

Importance of the Battle of Plassey: The battle of Plassey was of immense historical importance, it paved the way for the British mastery of Bengal and eventually of the 'whole of India. It boosted British prestige and at a single stroke raised them to the status of a major contender for the Indian Empire. The rich revenues of Bengal enabled them to organise a strong army and meet the cost of the conquest of the rest of country. Control over Bengal played a decisive role in the Anglo-French struggle. Lastly, the victory of Plassey enabled the Company and its servants to amass untold wealth at the cost of the helpless people of Bengal.

Loot of Bengal: Even though Mir Jafar owed his position to the Company, he soon repented the bargain he had struck. His treasury was soon emptied by the demands of the Company's officials for presents and bribes, the lead in the matter being given by Clive himself. As Colonel Malleon has put it, the single aim of the Company's officials was to "grasp all they could; to use Mir Jafar as a golden sack into which, they could dip their hands at pleasure." The Company itself was seized with unsurpassable greed. Believing that the *kamdhenu* had been found and that the wealth of Bengal was inexhaustible, the Directors of the Company ordered that Bengal should pay the expenses of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies and purchase out of its revenue all the Company's exports from India. The Company was no longer to merely trade with India, it was to use its control over the Nawab of Bengal to drain the wealth of the province.

Mir Jafar soon discovered that it was impossible to meet the full demands of the Company and its officials who, on their part, began to criticise the Nawab for his incapacity in fulfilling their expectations. And so, in October 1760, they forced him to abdicate in favour of his son-in-law, Mir Qasim who rewarded his benefactors by granting the Company the zamindari of the districts of Burdwan, Midnapore, and Chittagong, and giving handsome presents totaling 29 lakhs of rupees to the high English officials.

Causes of the Battle of Buxer

Military and Revenue Reforms by Mir Qasim: Mir Qasim, however, belied English hopes, and soon emerged as a threat to their position and designs in Bengal. He was an able, efficient, and strong ruler, determined to free himself from foreign control. He realised that a full treasury and an efficient army were essential to maintain his independence. He therefore tried to prevent public disorder, to increase his income by removing corruption from revenue administration, and to raise a modern and disciplined army along European lines. All this was not to the liking of the English. Most of all they disliked the Nawab's attempts to check the misuse of the *farman* of 1717 by the Company's servants, who demanded that their goods whether destined for export or for internal use should be free of duties. This injured the Indian merchants as they had to pay taxes from which the foreigners got complete exemption.

Abuses by the company officials and misuse of Dastak: Moreover, the Company's servants illegally sold the *dastaks* or free passes to friendly Indian merchants who were thereby able to evade the internal customs duties. These abuses ruined the honest Indian traders through unfair competition and deprived the Nawab of a very important source of revenue. In addition to this, the Company and its servants forced the Indian officials and zamindars to give them presents and bribes. They compelled the Indian artisans, peasants, and merchants to sell their goods cheap and to buy dear from them. People who refused were often flogged or imprisoned. These years have been described by a recent British historian, Percival Spear, as "the period of open and unashamed plunder." In fact the prosperity for which Bengal was renowned was being gradually destroyed.

Assertion of power by Mir Qasim: Mir Qasim realised that if these abuses continued he could never hope to make Bengal strong or free himself of the Company's control. He therefore took the drastic step of abolishing all duties on internal trade, thus giving his own subjects a concession that the English had seized by force. But the alien merchants were no longer willing to tolerate equality between themselves and Indians. They demanded the reimposition of duties on Indian traders. The battle was about to begin again. The truth of the matter was that there could not exist two masters in Bengal. While Mir Qasim believed that he was an independent ruler, the English demanded that he should act as a mere tool in their hands, for had they not put him in power?

The Battle of Buxar: Mir Qasim was defeated in a series of battles in 1763 and fled to Avadh where he formed an alliance with Shuja-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Avadh, and Shah Alam II, the fugitive Mughal Emperor. The three allies clashed with the Company's army at Buxar on 22 October 1764 and were thoroughly defeated. This was one of the most decisive battles of Indian history for it demonstrated the superiority of English arms over the combined army of two of the major Indian powers. It firmly established the British as masters of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and placed Avadh at their mercy.

Impact of the Battle of Buxar

Impact on Bengal: Clive, who had returned to Bengal in 1765 as its Governor, decided to seize the chance of power in Bengal and to gradually transfer the authority of Government from the Nawab to the Company. In 1763, the British had restored Mir Jafar as Nawab and collected huge sums for the Company and its high officials. On Mir Jafar's death, they placed his second son Nizam-ud-Daulah on the throne and as a reward made him sign a new treaty on 20 February 1765. By this treaty the Nawab was to disband most of his army and to administer Bengal through a Deputy *Subedar* who was to be nominated by the Company and who could not be dismissed without its approval. The Company thus gained supreme control over the administration (or *nizamat*) of Bengal. The members of the Bengal Council of the Company once again extracted nearly 15 lakhs of rupees from the new Nawab

Impact on Mughal Emperor: From Shah Alam II, who was still the titular head of the Mughal Empire, the Company secured the *Diwani*, or the right to collect revenue of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Thus, its control over Bengal was legalised and the revenues of this most prosperous of Indian provinces placed at its command. In return the Company gave him a subsidy of 26 million rupees and secured for him the districts of Kora and Allahabad. The Emperor resided in the fort of Alahabad for six years as a virtual prisoner of the English.

Impact on the Nawab of Awadh: The Nawab of Avadh, Shuja-ud-Daulah, was made to pay a war indemnity of five million rupees to the Company. Moreover, the two signed an alliance by which the Company promised to support the Nawab against an outside attack provided he paid for the services of the troops sent to his aid. This alliance made the Nawab a dependent of the Company.

The Nawab welcomed the alliance in the false belief that the Company, being primarily a trading body, was a transitory power while the Marathas and the Afghans were his real enemies.