

The turning point of the british empire's growth: the win in the battle of plasse...

[History](#), [Empires](#)



The Battle of Plassey was a pivotal skirmish that decided the fate of British colonization in India and spurred the Industrial Revolution in England and the British conquest of Northern India. Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah's army lost to Robert Clive's considerably smaller one at the banks of the Baghirathi river and this decisive defeat allowed for the installation of a puppet ruler, Mir Jafar, the annexation of Bengal and the installation of a tax and trade system that made England incredibly rich, right up to the point they were kicked out.

The skirmish at Plassey had its roots in the Seven Years War, which was a series of battles played out in different theaters and considered the first true world war. The Seven Years War was the natural conclusion of the War of Austrian Succession as Britain and France prepared to clash again. The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle during the War of Austrian Succession forbade direct intervention and thus the two opposing empires would battle for control of colonies and power through colonial auxiliaries. The three Carnatic wars were played out by proxies of the British and French Empire in southern India and the British victories helped solidify Britain's control over India, allowing Indian resources to flow into the English war machine. This was one of the many factors that led to the British Empire winning the Seven Years War and thus becoming a force to be reckoned with. The Treaty of Paris ended the Carnatic Wars and allowed for the return of Pondichery and Chandernagore to France and prevented the French from letting French people man French trading outposts. French ambitions for India were crushed.

Why did the British want Bengal so badly? To answer that we would have to know why the British wanted India. Plenty of English historians, like John Seeley (*The Expansion of England*, 1883) were of the mind that India was acquired completely by accident. P. J Marshall would argue that “ The growth of territorial empire in India was neither planned nor directed from Britain. It was an initiative of the East India Company’s officials, operating in India.” They were there originally for trade and loot. Trade with India provided raw goods that Britain needed, because Britain’s trade with Canton and India was depleting their stocks of bullion and they needed a way to replenish the British treasury. The British East India Company petitioned the local rulers of Calcutta and Madras and the Mughal emperor for permission to set up storehouses (factories, as they called them) and began to recruit mercenaries to protect them. Soon enough, the Company began offering their armies up as protection to the nawabs in exchange for money and would pit one ruler against another. This and the doctrine of lapse (where the Company would take over if there was no male heir) helped their colonial land grab. Plenty of British bureaucrats paid huge bribes to get there, and they cut their teeth on the natives in India before being transferred to British colonies in Africa. Many Indians were also used as slaves in other colonies and as soldiers in the British Army and plenty of sites in India were used for the manufacture of opium, which would then be sold to Chinese ports and this would lead to the first Opium War.

The story of the British in India is a series of tales of Indians betraying their countrymen for wealth and power and we begin with Nawab Siraj ud-

Daulah's grandfather, Alwardi Khan, who rose from poverty to become the Nawab of Bengal after capturing Bengal's capital, Murshidabad. He had a healthy suspicion of the British and collected customs duty from them, even though the British East India Trading Company had a firman (an Islamic decree) from suzerain Farrukhsiyar stating that they had duty-free trading rights in Bengal in exchange for a mere three thousand rupees a year. He allowed them to build more fortifications and the Maratha ditch to protect his people from Berar Marathas, but the large taxes levied on goods coming to his district by the British and the duty-free trading the British enabled for the native traders cut down on Khan's profits significantly. His grandson, Siraj ud-Daulah, was not as forgiving. When he found that the British were improving their fortifications in anticipation of the French, he demanded they stop. Upon their refusal, he stormed Calcutta and Cossimbazaar, destroyed their paltry defenses with 50,000 of his cavalry and took several British officers prisoner. The city was occupied on 16 June and the fort-cum-factory of Cossimbazaar surrendered on the 20th of June. The officers of Siraj ud-Daulah's guard then transferred the British prisoners to the common dungeon of Fort William. The dungeon was originally built to contain only six prisoners and all one hundred forty six were put in there. The next day, twenty three walked out. The rest were dead. The Nawab apparently did not know of the conditions the prisoners had been kept in but the damage was done. On 16 August 1756, an expeditionary force was sent out from Madras with Colonel Clive and Admiral Watson to "re-establish the British settlements in Bengal, but also to obtain ample recognition of the Company's privileges and reparation for its losses...any signs of dissent and ambition

amongst the Nawab's subjects must be encouraged..." as stated in a letter from the council of Ft. St George. In December 1756, they joined forces with fugitives of the Nawab and on the 2nd of January 1757, Calcutta was retaken. On 9th January 1757, Captain Coote and Major Kilpatrick stormed the town of Hoogly, twenty three miles east of Calcutta. Nearly a month later, ud-Daulah sent the main body of his forces into Calcutta. Clive attacked the Nawab's encampment under cover of the night on the 4th of February. The heavy losses suffered by the Nawab's army convinced him to sign the Treaty of Alinagar on the 5th of February, which stated that all British goods would move through duty-free, that the British could continue building their fortifications and that the Nawab would recognize all provisions of the 1717 firman issued by Farrukhsiyar. Clive remained agitated by the events of the Seven Years War so far and the French, led by de Bussy were advancing on Chandernagore, which led to him bribing Hoogly's governor to remain a British ally. On 24th March, after a six hour battle, French forces surrendered.

Furious, ud-Daulah began making alliances with the French and Afghanis, in preparation for war against the British and moved a division of his army to Plassey. It was then that the paymaster of the Nawab's army and the Jagat Seth (the Bengal traders), along with several officers drew up a treaty with Clive to betray the Nawab, in exchange for thirty lacs of rupees and five percent of the loot.

On the morning of June 23rd, the Nawab's soldiers advanced upon the waiting British troops and began firing. Despite their relative technological

superiority because of their howitzers, the British were being steadily decimated until they retreated behind the Bhagirathi's embankment. The Nawab's weapons were useless, because it had rained the night before, ruining the gunpowder that he was going to use. Once Mir Madan Khan, a loyal officer of the Nawab was killed, the men began to retreat. Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh and Yar Lutuf Khan had assembled their troops near the battlefield but made no move to actually join the battle, despite promising that they would, after Madan's death. Siraj ud-Daulah had left the battlefield on the suggestion of Mir Jafar, and upon hearing of his defeat, fled, but was killed by Jafar's forces near Patna. The installation of Mir Jafar as the head of the Company's puppet government in Bengal allowed for them to further entrench themselves in Bengal and then spread out to the Deccan and Hyderabad, further repulsing the French and Dutch. Other native governments slowly toppled and the tax systems set up by the Company diverted Indian revenue to places the British needed. India's GDP fell from 24.5% in 1750 to a 2.8% in 1880, as found by Simmons (1985). India was a thriving culture and society, well on par with that of the British before they came. The British did not thrust India into the world market, instead choosing to feed from it to increase its own revenue and the withdrawal in 1947 and subsequent dealings with Russia and China and Pakistan have only left the country unstable and gave rise to the birth of a far right version of Hindu nationalism. Jawaharlal Nehru, in *The Discovery of India* (1946), portrays Clive as having won the battle "by promoting treason and forgery", and points out that British rule in India had "an unsavoury beginning and something of that bitter taste has clung to it ever since."

The mid 18th century was when the only resistance to complete British control of India was the Nawab of Bengal, the Dutch, French and Portuguese having been successfully chased off, and the outcome at Plassey was when “the night of eternal gloom” began for India, as termed by Nabin Chandra Sen. The outcome only boosted Clive’s and by extension, Britain’s prestige. Clive already had a reputation as a clever commander despite his depression, one who would only be matched by Churchill. There are plenty of things that do not make sense, like historical sources stating that Clive held back his troops for the final charge because he did not recognize Mir Jafar’s banners. This makes patently no sense because regimental banners of that era were huge. No, he must have been holding back because of his doubts about Jafar’s trustworthiness, because if he could be induced to betray his king, he could betray them too. It did not help that the Nawab had reconciled with Jafar a few days before, which ended up with Jafar bringing in the rear vanguard and whilst the man had sent a note to Clive reassuring him of his intent to honor the treaty he had signed with him, Clive mustn’t have trusted him enough. This battle was the decisive, swift end of the medieval era in Indian history and the beginning of the modern era, in terms of rulers, cultures and societies. As the British dismantled the local rulers kingdoms and subdued them by turning them against each other, India shattered into pieces and was brought forward kicking and screaming into modern history, with the British laying down aqueducts, hospitals and telegraph lines. It also created a divide in communities as the British pitted the various religious factions against each other and gave certain privileges to certain sects of people (such as the Sikhs), creating class hierarchies. The British had

originally recruited their sepoy and bureaucrats from the ranks of discontent, lower caste Indians and their reshaping and reconstitution of the caste system would only help sow the seeds of their own empire's destruction. India's forced transition into an agricultural colony of England created mass unemployment, breakdown of a social system and the introduction of the idea that land was not a communal property led to the rise of a class of Indians who were Indians only in name-they behaved as the British did when it came to bureaucracy and the new land system implemented to the advantage of the British only enabled the rise of the zamindaris.

The Battle of Plassey was redacted many times throughout the course of history, both by the British historians and by Indian ones, each to support a different discourse that was currently ongoing in society. The Indian one has mostly remained the same, with Jawaharlal Nehru, one of India's prime ministers summing it up in his book, the Discovery of India, as this:

“ Very soon after Plassey, the Bengal plunder began to arrive in London and the effect appears to have been instantaneous, because all historians agree that the Revolution began in 1770 and probably nothing has ever equalled the rapidity of the change that has followed...from the third quarter of the 18th century onwards, the industrial revolution in England had begun, the age of the spinning genny, and steam locomotive...no investment has ever equalled the profit reaped from the Indian plunder, because for nearly fifty years Great Britain stood without a competitor at sheer mercantilism.”

The textile industry nearly collapsed as manufactured goods from Britain were sold to Indians made out of their raw goods, custom duties were imposed to prevent internal trade and levies and sanctions were used to prevent Indian made goods from reaching foreign markets. Is it any wonder that the British were so royally ticked at Gandhi's insistence that only things made in India should be used by Indian people and his salt march stirred up so much controversy? He hit at the one thing the British understood best-money. Remnants of this policy still echo in India's recent Swachh Bharat movement, an initiative by the Prime Minister to draw more foreign companies to invest in India.

The British were bemused at the fall of India to them, and still are, to this day, because its acquisition was not planned out by the British government. Ramsay Muir in *The History of British India* explicitly states that the " East India Company became a ruler against it's own will". C. A. Bayley in *New Cambridge History of India* (1988), said that " Colonialism in India was a result of an uneasy collaboration between British and Indian Merchants, Bankers and New Gentry". To them, it was a mistake that brought them great fortune. It is only later, with the advent of Fanon and the dying out of those of John Dee's imperialist thinking that the British would begin to accept their mistakes and look at the consequences of their invasion. Plenty saw it as the bringing of reason to savages and plenty more, like Clive and Hastings, saw their colonization as something that would make Britain rich beyond its dreams.

Now, it is fashionable to decry the British Empire today: but for all its faults — and there were many — India, the greatest democracy in the world, is what it is today because it still draws, in law, parliamentary democracy and its armed forces, on the best of the imperial legacy. – Kevin Myers, “ The Irish Independent”

Most people of Bengal do not like to think of the battle of Plassey, because we have always had a complicated history with defeat and things we don't like in general, choosing instead to think of it as a temporary setback, or ignoring it altogether and focusing on sensual pursuits. If British rule benefited your family, you could wax nostalgic about those days, when your grandfather was a zamindar. If it did not, you could choose to stay quiet about it, or bring it out as a conversation starter at cocktails. There are the few who worship the rebels Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose, who are vehemently anti-British, but they grow fewer. There is a scale model of the Battle of Plassey at Victoria Memorial and there are plaques that commemorate the site of the battle, but most of us are apathetic and dislike the past, wanting to instead slog into the future with our way of doing things and not change. The rest of India is too caught up in its old troubles, too radicalized, too ashamed to look back at our past, unwilling to see the not-glorious parts, all too willing to whitewash and make it fit the current political narrative.

Does this mean that this way of discourse will stay the same? No. It will change, just as perceptions of war and the opposing sides change. As right-wing nationalism increases in both Britain and India, Plassey will have more

justifications attached to it, if it is chosen to be remembered, perhaps, but it is a battle that has been left in history, because there are always more wars to fight in the future.