

SELF INTEREST OR MYOPIA? INDIAN REGIME AND EAST INDIA COMPANY IN CONQUEST OF BENGAL

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Abstract

The conquest of the British East India Company is very much supported by the careless decision making of the Indian regime. Historians have believed that during eighteen century the ruler failed to understand the long term threat by the East India Company. Efforts have been made through this paper to examine the decisions and situations that led to the Battle of Buxar and find how the tax collection rights went into the hands of the Company. The after math of the battle increased the British credibility and allied Indian regimes that were acting in self Interest with the British East India Company. This is basically a new explanation for an old puzzle of history.

Keywords:East India Company;Nawab of Bengal;French;Nawab of Arcot;Mughal,Nawab of Hyderabad.

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1. Introduction

Early eighteenth century was the time when the European companies were trying to expand their trade by seeking permission from the Indian ruler. Historians have believed that the decision and the self-interest of the Indian regime facilitated East India Company in its motives [1]. The “Battle of Plassey” indeed made the Nawab a mere tool for the Company [5]. The British logistics conduct and the trained European soldiers made British unconquerable and provide them dominance in the Deccan [3]. The defeat of the other European competitors gave British East India Company optimum profits and the heavy duties imposed by the British on the local traders using the “Diwani” rights crushed them out of the market. Self-interest and lack coordination between the Indian rulers became a major cause for their defeat [5]. The first face-off between the French and Nawab of Arcot exposed the weakness of the Indian armies in front of the European soldiers and showed them the way to influence the decisions of the Indian ruler [2]. The Indian rulers failed to understand the motives of the British and landed in their trap and ended up making decisions as per the guidances and demands of the Company. The Company did not take control over the states in order to avoid any kind of revolt at that time but later they did that also.

2. A model of the Conflicts and Geopolitical conditions

In order to understand the failure and the self-centered decisions or could be said as the fears of the regimes that resulted in the battle and the defeat it is important to understand the geopolitical conditions of that time. In 1740 following the Austrian succession war that took place between the Austria and the Prussia resulted in the “First Carnatic war” in India soil. The forces of English and the French entered in the Austria-Prussia war in opposite sides [9]. At first the British Naval officer Commodore Bernet arrived India with his fleet and captured some French ships and threatened Pondicherry. The French Governor Joseph Francis Dupleix urged for urgent help and attacked Madras with the help of the troops of the French Governor of “Mauritus La Bourdonnais”. After several days of bombardment and casualties the French finally captured Madras [2]. The Nawab of Carnatic Anwar-Ud-Din did not like the hostilities as Dupleix had promised him to hand over the fort of Madras to the Nawab after the war but later denied to do so and said the he will hand over the fort at right time. Nawab Anwar-ud-din declared war against French and sent his troops to take down the French. The French Governor Dupleix lost

the support of “La Bourdonnais” over the situation of Madras, and the eventually Dupleix fought the war with small number of troops [9]. The war took place in 1746 and the Nawab of Carnatic was defeated by the French army. This war was important in Indian history as the European and the Indian armies fought each other for the first time in history. It also revealed the helplessness of Indian army against small number of well-trained European soldiers. Dupleix had understood by the end of the war that small well trained soldiers might play an important role in tempering the courts and the changing the decisions of the Indian princes. At the mean time the Austrian succession war ended in 1748 with “Aix-la-chappelle treaty” and as per the norms and conditions of the treaty French handed over Madras to the English. The war was over, but it had completely changed the characters of these trading companies in India.

Again in 1748 the death of the Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah triggered the war for succession[5]. The second Carnatic war was a war for power in south India between various Indian rulers backed by the support of the English and the French [9]. The conflicts raised between Muzaffar Jung the heir to the Nawab Nizam-ul-Mulk and Nasir Jung second son of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Muzaffar Jung was able to take the power in Hyderabad and Nasir Jung started looking for allies for his battle of succession. Meanwhile killings and battles were taking place between the forces of Chanda Shahib and Anwar-ud-din for the Nawabhip Arcot. Nawab Anwar-ud-din was one of the loyal man and designated person of the Nawab of Hyderabad but following the death of the Nawab of Hyderabad the Nawab of Arcot was left off guard. Whereas Chanda Shahib was the son-in-law of the previous Nawab of Arcot Dost Ali the French wanted to reduce the rapidly growing influence of the English in the southern region. In order to reduce the English power and influence in southern region the French allied with Chanda Shahib and Muzaffar Jung to bring them in power and make them Nawab of Arcot and Hyderabad respectively [9]. Sensing the threat English supported Nasir Jung and Anwar-ud-din. Later French provided them ransom along with sepoys and European soldiers. After getting troops from the French Chanda Shahib and Muzaffar Jung advanced towards Arcot, the capitol of Carnatic. In 1748 at Ambur south west of Arcot Anwar-ud-din fought them and got killed in the battle and Chanda Shahib became the Nawab of Arcot. Mohammad Ali the son of Anwar-ud-din was there now to take the Nawabship from Chanda Shahib [9]. In 1751 Nasir Jung forces with English troops and a large force of Mohammad Ali faced Chanda Shahib and Muzaffar and French forces for almost two

weeks. The French forces started to collapse. Muzaffar Jung got scared and surrendered to Nasir Jung. Dupleix the French Governor regained control over the situation by a successful night attack at the camp of Nasir Jung [9]. This attack was so successful that it forced Nasir Jung to retrieve back to Arcot and the English forces also retrieved to fort St. David seeing the Nasir Jung's move on the other hand Mohhamad Ali was left isolated and off guard. French forces tried capitalize on that situation and capture Tiruvadi which was very close to fort St. David. Looking at the threat the English and Nasir Jung troops helped Mohhamad Ali to attack French positions [2]. The attack went against them and they faced defeat and the British forces left Mohammad Ali behind and went back to the Fort St. David. The Mohammad Ali army retreated to the fortress of Gingee. Meanwhile Nasir Jung advances towards Arcot, but ended up in negotiation with Dupleix and killed by his supporter. Muzaffar Jung was announced as the new Nizam of Hyderabad. French Governor Dupleix enjoyed great power in south and setting beside the Nizam and got control over region of River Krishna [9]. Now the only obstacle for French in south was Mohammad Ali. Dupleix and Mohammad Ali started negotiating over issues meanwhile the Nizam of Hyderabad got killed in a clash by the people who betrayed Nasir Jung. The French officer Bussy who was with Muzaffar Jung at that time tried to control the situation and appointed Muzaffar Jung's uncle Salabat Jung as the new Nizam of Hyderabad. On the other hand the negotiations between Dupleix and Mohammad Ali did not go well and Ali co-operated English forces openly. Robert Clive planned an attack on Arcot at Nizam of Arcot and got approval from his superiors and attacked Arcot and captured Arcot. Although Chanda Shahib surrendered on the term but was later killed and his head was send to Mohammad Ali. Meanwhile Mohammad Ali fell out with his allies the Marathas and the Mysorean. Dupleix capitalized and asked them to change sides. Mohammad Ali was asked by the British to capture the French held forts of Covelong and Chinglapet but the British was having limited troops to help in that condition Clive came forward and took the command of the attack and successfully captured the forts[9]. Later with a series of battle of Trichinopoly the French suffered great losses and Dupleix was called back and replaced by M. Godeheu who was asked to end the battle by negotiation and the English commander received the same order from England and in 1755 a peace treaty was signed between the two and they officially ended the second Carnatic war. Although the French suffered a great loss in terms of soldiers but have their man in power in

Hyderabad. Other hand the British were facilitated with expansion in south. The influence of the French in the Deccan has been undermined after this war.



Figure 1. Map of India showing the trade centers of various European companies [11].

The East India Company felt that the large fee demanded by the Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah was unfair. The Company also felt that they will not be able to expand the trade with Siraj-ud-daulah as the Nawab. They wanted a puppet ruler in place of Siraj-ud-daulah who would act in the favor of the East India Company and tried to do so. The Nawab got anger with such actions of the Company and ordered them to stop fortification and stop getting involved in their governmental matters and asked them to pay their taxes. East India Company refused to do so and the Nawab with his army of around 30,000 soldiers and captured “Kassim bazar” and the “Fort William” of Calcutta from the East India Company and cut down all support and supply to the Company ships and prisoned the Company officers in a small prison termed as the “Black Hole of

Calcutta” [4] . Many prisoners died in there because of heat exhaustion and being smothered. East India Company got the news and immediately responded to the attack. East India Company sent forces from Madras to retaliate under the command of Robert Clive. Along with the forces naval fleet were also sent to aid in the battle to Calcutta. . Robert Clive army was badly outnumbered and on the other side Nawab was having a army of around 62,000 soldiers along with French forces. Robert Clive started making secret deals with Nawab’s commanders Mir Zafar and offered them the Nawabship after the victory. The battle took place at a place called Palashi on the bank of river Bhagirathi [4]. On 23rd June 1757 both the armies faced each other at the battle field. Suddenly heavy rain and storm hit the battle field. The British cleverly covered their artillery like gun powder and canons etc. On the other hand Nawab and the French did not cover their canons and other artillery. After the storm the Nawab’s army attacked the British troops they were taken by surprise as their canons and guns opened fire. Meanwhile Mir Zafar refused to fight and his betrayal forced the Nawab to retreat and he finally ended up losing the battle. After winning the entire province British appointed Mir Zafar as the new Nawab of Bengal. The Battle of Plassey was a gigantic victory for British East India Company over the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies on 23rd June 1757 [4]. Battle of Plassey was a great example of friending your enemy’s enemy and diplomacy. Moreover it was the first time when British had fought an Indian ruler alone for their own agenda. It was their first big victory on Indian soil. On 29th June 1757 Mir Zafar was made the Nawab of Bengal. Siraj-ud-daulah tried to escape was caught and killed by Mir Zafar forces on 2nd July 1757. French lost their influence over the region and suffered great setback.

The treaty of the second Carnatic did not completely settle the issues between the English and the French in India. Conflicts between English and French broke out with the seven year’s war in Europe in 1756 as they entered the war in opposite sides. The Third Carnatic war in Indian soil was the local version of the seven year’s war between the English and the French. Unlikely the previous two wars this one was not confined to the Deccan region, it spread till Bengal but ultimately the war was concluded in the south. In 1757 the English forces captured the “Chandernagore” (presently known as Chandannagar) defeating the Nawab of Bengal Siraj-ud-daulah and French allies. The French government sent Lally as the Governor to India. Governor Lally immediately tried to besiege Madras and asked Bussy to assist him in the same. Bussy was

well aware of the risk on leaving Hyderabad and told Lally about the probable consequences. But Lally wanted to capture Madras from the British as it was the main trade center of East India Company in India and asked Bussy to assist under any circumstances. Bussy having no choice left for Madras leaving Hyderabad off guard. Lord Robert Clive took advantage of this situation and asked Colonel Ford to capture Hyderabad. Colonel Ford attacked Hyderabad and brought the Nawab of Hyderabad Salabat Jung under his control. Salabat Jung having no choice left gave support to the English on the other hand French forces failed to capture Madras and lost the battle. The future of French in India started looking clouded as they had lost control over the ruler and states. And then in the year 1760 both the forces faced each other in the “Battle of Wandiwash” with the English forces led by Sir Lyre Coote and the French forces by Comte de Lally. French forces suffered loss and finally got defeated by the English forces resulted in falling of Pondicherry the capital of French in India along with Jinji and Karaikal in the hand of the British. Bussy was taken as prisoner and Lally also surrendered at Pondicherry to the British and with this the fate of the French was sealed by the British. Finally the seven year war ended in 1763 with “the treaty of Paris” and also ended the English-French in the Deccan. As per the treaty of Paris the French got their Pondicherry and other territory back from British but was not allowed to fortify them. This brought an end to what Duplex and French intensions of building French empire in India. On the other hand having control over the Nawab of Bengal and Hyderabad British gained supreme power in India. They started naval bases in Bombay and other richer trade centers like Calcutta and Madras. The British had grown by these battles as the supreme power and then the rulers started thinking of saving themselves from any kind of military actions [1].

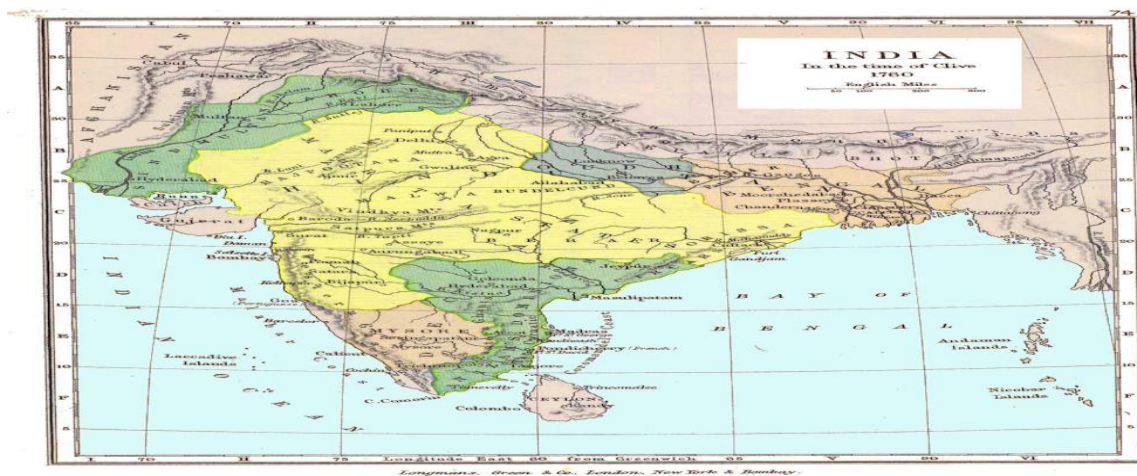


Figure 2. *Political Map of India during the time of Governor General Robert Clive [10].*

3. Why did the Nawab of Awadh and the Mughal Emperor ally with the Nawab of Bengal?

Historians believe that the reason for the alliance was to throw British out of India [6], but same was not the reason behind the alliance it just happened that British were the major problem in the path of their plans and ambitions. Mir Qasim wanted to act independent and away from the influence of the British and to fulfill his objective, he started manufacturing guns and fire locks. He undertook some reforms under which he reduced the expenditure on maintenance of palaces and other administrative buildings and imposed new taxes on trade. As a move to gain military strength he shifted the capital from Monghyar to Murshidabad. On the other hand this thing annoyed British. British got annoyed and sensed the threat mounting over them with his decisions as they wanted him act as a puppet of the company [6]. This all led to conflicts between Mir Qasim and the British, before the battle of Buxar Mir Qaim faced British Imperial army in three battles of Katwa, Gina, and Udaynala and lost all of them [8]. Mir Qasim was compelled to seek for alliance if wanted to act independent so he went to Allahabad. On the other hand the Mughal Emperor wanted to expand his empire by merging states but he knew that British will not allow him to do so and he cannot overpower British by his own. So he looked for a alliance to defeat British and gain control to fulfill his objective. Whereas the Nawab of Awadh was also looking to gain power. They all had different objectives but had a common obstacle the East India Company, although they had never fought in alliance before they but they all were desperately wanted to defeat the Company. So eventually they formed an alliance having different motives in minds and one enemy on the battle field.

4. Bengal decision making

Eventually the war was declared against the East India Company on 23rd October 1764 and was fought at the grounds of “KatKauli” a place about 5-6 km from Buxar [5]. The British Imperial army was outnumbered as the combined forces of the ruler had an army of around 40,000 soldiers whereas British had about 10,000 soldiers in their army. There was total lack of coordination between the ruler and their armies as they have fought in alliance before whereas on the other hand the British sent officer Hector nicely managed his army, he choosed to divide his army into various columns to divide the enemy into groups and then attacked the offguarded group of the enemy because he knew he cannot take down all the army of the enemy at a single

stroke. Shuja-ud-daula faced severe attack from the British choosed to abandone the Mughal Emperor in the middle of the war to save his own life which almost gave what the British wanted the soldiers moral went down seeing the commanders leaving the field. Their forces faced much causality and eventually collapsed and finally they lost the battle and the major war victims that are Mir Qasim got captured and ended up paying the so called war expenses worth about 3 million rupees gems to the British East India Company and later committed suicide [6]. On the other hand Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II was left with no choice signed the “treaty of Allahabad”.for his own safety and thought it is better to hand over something than everything. He failed to understand that the people would not accept foreigner ruling the states, he failed to understand the fact that the people was on his side not the company and the Company was here for business and was badly outnumbered. He just signed the treaty ignoring the long term consequences of it.

5. Why the Mughal Emperor handed over the Diwani rights?

After the victory of the battle of Buxar the British Governor Lord Robert Clive signed the “treaty of Allahabad” with the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II that gave East India Company to manage and collect taxes from the states that were ruled by the Mughal and in return the Company paid a fixed amount of money to the Mughal Empire as revenue that was again fixed by the British itself [6]. They also started appointing Residents in the court of the Indian ruler. The residents were the commercial and political agents of the East India Company. The company introduced land rules and took control of various lands from the land lords because they did not have the proof or legal documents of the land. The Mughal Emperor preferred to accept rather than death or complete defeat. He was concerned about himself and signed the treaty.

They also started appointing Residents in the court of the Indian ruler. The residents were the commercial and political agents of the East India Company. They started polluting the whole system and turned rulers against themselves and increased internal conflicts between the states to enjoy more and more war loots and rewards and made several reforms to take land from not only from the Kings but also from the farmers and the land lords

6. Conclusion

Indian ruler's carelessness towards trade and their ambitious nature and greed gave European companies the chance to get involved in the politics and showed them their weakness. Later the defeat of the French, Danes, Dutch and Portuguese in India British confined their trading power and rights and gained total control over the market. With the won in the "Battle of Buxar" British gained trade monopoly over the areas that were under the control of the defeated rulers and forced the local traders to sell their products to the British at low rates and this trade monopoly enriched East India Company. The company had understood that Indian ruler's armies are helpless in front of the trained European soldiers and took over the Tax collection rights from the ruler rather than total control in order to avoid mass revolt against them. Later they formed various policies to capture the land and kingdom of Indian ruler and established "Rule of Law".

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