

British Raj

The British Raj refers to the direct rule of the British crown over its colonial holdings in India. Although English colonial ventures had begun centuries before, it was not until the Indian Rebellion of 1857 when the British Government directly administered the subcontinent.

Along with providing details of the British Raj, this article will also give a brief history about the colonial ventures of the East India Company before its dissolution.

The details provided will be useful in the modern Indian History segment of the IAS Exam.

Facts about British Colonialism

The following table will give details about the British Raj

Facts about British Colonialism	
First Viceroy	Charles Canning
Last Viceroy	Lord Louis Mountbatten
Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Calcutta (1858–1911)• New Delhi (1911–1947)• Shimla (summer capital) (1864–1947)
First factory established by the East India Company	Masulipatnam (1611)
Items of trade by the East India Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cotton• Silk• Indigo• Saltpeter• Tea• Opium

Beginning of English Colonialism in India

To challenge Portuguese dominance of the Oceans, both the English and the Dutch floated their own private stock companies to fund their trading expeditions in 1600 and 1602 respectively. It wasn't long before both came into conflict with each other regarding colonial possessions in Asia.

The Dutch were more successful in the Indonesian archipelago while the English established a firm foothold in the Indian subcontinent when they established their first factory in Masulipatnam in 1611, while the second factory was established at Surat in 1613.

Peace was reached when the Dutch Prince, William of Orange, ascended the throne of the British Isles in 1688. An agreement between the two saw the English East Indian Company keep the textile industry of India while the more valuable spice trade of Indonesia was left to the Dutch.

Eventually though, trade in textiles overtook that of spices and by 1720, the English East in India Company had overtaken its Dutch rivals in terms of profitability. It wasn't long before the company shifted from its initial base in Surat to Fort St. George in Calcutta.

Rise and Fall of Company rule in India

With a basis established in Bengal, it wasn't long before the East Indian Company began to interfere in the local politics of the region, despite their initial objective of just trading. In 1757 Mir Jafar, asked for support to overthrow the Nawab of Bengal in return for trading concessions.

Thus on June 23, 1757, the battle of Plassey saw a numerically inferior British army under Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal's army twice its size. Of course the betrayal of Mir Jafar also helped in the defeat of the Nawab. As agreed, Mir Jafar was installed as a ruler subservient to the British.

The battle made the British realise that they have the strength to overcome smaller Indian kingdoms by setting them against each other. The battle of Plassey would mark the beginning of the British imperialism in the subcontinent.

East India Company embarked on a policy of expansion and consolidation, winning territories for the British Empire in Asia. Along with Indian territories they even acquired Singapore in 1819, Malacca in 1824 and Burma in 1826.

The Company grew opium in farms owned by it and exported it to China. It exported enough of it to China that the population got addicted to opium, prompting Chinese authorities to ban it in 1839. This led to the First Opium War which China promptly lost and led to re-legalizing the importation of opium into China.

It was Indian Rebellion of 1857 which spelt doom for the Company's fortune in India. Although it was suppressed with catastrophic loss of lives on both sides, it prompted the British Crown to review how effectively or not the company rules in India. Arbitrary laws such as Doctrine of Lapse, along with discrimination against Indians had led to the rebellion. Keeping these in mind the British Government took steps to dissolve the East India Company in 1858 appointing a Governor General. A few years later, Queen Victoria took the title of Empress of India.

Rule of British Crown in India

Queen Victoria promised that the new British government would work for the betterment of its Indian subjects. This would mean imparting education that would stamp out certain cultural practices like sati.

To ensure there would be no further threat to its rule, the British would also embark on a policy of Divide and Rule pitting Hindus and Muslims against one another. In plicy this would translate into the partition of Bengal in 1905 and encouragement to form the Muslim League of India in 1907

Without consulting the Indian leaders Britain declared war on Germany India's behalf in 1914. Thus in World War I about 1.5 million Indian soldiers served in the British Indian army.

This still did not change the British attitude towards their Indian subjects who in turn introduced ordinances that curbed the freedom of the Indians. For example the Rowlatt Act, the resulting protests against it led to the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

When World War II broke out, India once again contributed hugely to the British war effort. In addition to troops, the princely states donated substantial amounts of cash.

But by then the economic losses of Britain in the war had begun to take its toll and events in the Indian independence movement such as the Quit India Movement and the mutiny of the Royal Indian navy signalled that the British were losing control of their Indian holdings.

With the passing of the Indian Independence Act of 1947, the partition of India took place where the subcontinent was divided into the dominion of India and the dominion of Pakistan on August 15 and August 14 respectively. The British Raj had finally come to an end.