

French Colonialism in India

French Colonies in India were by far the smallest of the European possessions in terms of area. Although the French colonialism was overcome by its British adversaries, they nevertheless played a crucial role in accelerating the colonisation of the Indian subcontinent. French were the last Europeans to arrive in India.

This article will give a timeline of French Colonialism which will be useful in the Modern Indian history segment of the IAS Exam.

Origins of French colonialism in India

The first French venture to India was around the 16th century when expeditions were sent to India for trade purposes. Not all of them were successful.

During the reign of Louis XIV, the king's famous minister Colbert laid the foundation of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales (French East India Company) in 1664, in which the king also took a deep interest.

First expedition to India, led by Francois Caron (French Governor), reached Surat in 1667 and established the first trading post (Surat) in the subcontinent.

Another factory was established in Masulipatam in 1669. In 1673, the township at Chandernagore near Calcutta was established. The same year, the French (Francois Martin) acquired the area of Pondicherry from the Sultan of Bijapur, thus establishing the Pondicherry colony (1674.)

Expansion of French Colonialism

The first governor of Pondicherry, François Martin, established a series of plans to transform the enclave into a major trading town, but some of these plans were put on hold due to intermittent conflict between the Dutch and the English. The Dutch even managed to take Pondicherry in 1693 before handing it back to the French following the Treaty of Ryswick in September 1697.

Until 1741, the French were mainly interested in commercial ventures peacefully acquiring territories such as Yanam, Mahe and Karaikal. The town of Pondicherry began to expand and soon it became a rich trading town under able governors like Pierre Chrisophe Le Noir.

In 1741, Joseph François Dupleix arrived in India as the governor of the French territories. Unlike his predecessors, he had a burning desire to establish a French empire in India despite the indifference of his superiors in Paris.

Colonial intrigues between the British and French. Despite Dupleix's dismissal, other French governors were more than willing to continue his work. They expanded their influence in Bengal which was a British sphere of influence.

It eventually resulted in the French egging Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah to attack Fort William in Calcutta leading to the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The defeat of the French and their allies resulted in the entire province of Bengal coming under direct British control. This would lead to a chain of events that would ultimately lead to the entire subcontinent coming under British control.

The French tried to recover its lost territories and drive the British out of India, but it all resulted in a failure culminating in the Siege of Pondicherry in 1760. The victorious British burnt Pondicherry to the ground in 1761 in revenge for the French burning Fort St David in 1758.

Pondicherry was returned to the French in 1763 and was the result from the ground up. By 1769 the French crown realised it was too expensive in letting the French East India Company continue its operation, effectively abolishing it in that year. The French Possessions were now under the direct control of the government.

Decline of French Colonialism in India

By the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat in 1816, the French had the following establishments still in its possession

1. Pondichéry
2. Chandernagore
3. Karaikal
4. Mahe
5. Yanam
6. The lodges at Machilipatnam, Kozhikode and Surat

Most of the enclaves had lost their former glory due to a long period of wars between the French and British. For the next 138 years, successive governors tried to improve the infrastructure of the colonies

With the independence of India on 15 August, 1947, France eventually decided to relinquish their territories in India. The lodges in Machilipatnam, Kozhikode and Surat were added in October in 1947. Chandernagore was relinquished to Indian on 2nd May 1950. It became a part of West Bengal on October 2nd 1954. On 1st November of that same year, Pondicherry, Yanam, Mahe and Karaikal were given over to the Indian Union

Ultimately the French and Indian governments finally ratified a treaty in 1962 which confirmed the transfer of territorial possessions to the Union of India. French Colonialism in India had finally ended.

