



**THE STUDY**  
An Institute for IAS

# History of Modern India

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# Historiography of the Modern Indian History

## Different approaches to the study of modern Indian history

### 1. The Imperialist approach

**a. Cambridge School:** This school of thought approached the study of British Empire from the imperialist point of view. Scholars like J. A. Gallagher and Percival Seal promoted this approach. This school tried to defend the British position on several issues. So, the scholars associated with this school came to be known as 'British Apologist' scholars. These scholars justified the British rule and policies towards India. This school gave emphasis over following points:

1. The British had no specific plan to conquer India. So, India was conquered in a 'fit of absent mindedness'. In other words, India was conquered unintentionally. But, once they conquered India, they tried to help Indians with their policies.

2. In India, colonialism did not exist as a political, economic and social phenomenon. It was just a foreign rule. Hence, the difference between a colonial rule and a foreign rule should be understood.

3. These scholars denied the phenomenon of 'Drain of Wealth' as well as the 'economic exploitation' of India by the British.

4. They denied the phenomenon of 'nationalism' in India. According to them, India could never be a nation as India was divided on the basis of region, caste and community etc.

Then, the question arises that if India is not a nation then what to make of the 'Indian National Movement' against the British rule? Their reply is that, it was just a product of the imagination of few Indian elites, who were seeking their own interest by projecting such views. In other words, Indians first invented colonialism, then they invented nationalism as a force to counter it. Worst of all, these scholars adopted the paradigm of 'patron-client relationship' in their interpretation of Indian nationalism. According to them, as the British rule expanded new economic opportunities in India, rivalries started among the Indian elites to appropriate maximum benefits. It was in this course that some Indian elites were established as patrons (broker) at the regional level and they created a band of followers as their client. In this way, many regional patrons sprang up. Now, there was a need for coordination among these regional patrons. It was in this context that the all India patrons emerged. Thus, the imperialist scholars declared the Indian nationalism to be merely a reflection of the selfish interests of different elite groups in India. However, its one time enthusiastic champions no longer subscribed to this model interpretation.

### b. New Cambridge School

In 1970s, some imperialist scholars modified their views and declared their departure from the old Cambridge approach. They came to be known as the new Cambridge Scholars. Among others, Gordon Johnson and Christopher Bayly are important historians of this school. This school claimed to have moved from 'the provinces to the local regions' and 'from the community to the factions' in their interpretations of the developments of Indian national movement. In this way, they laid down the 'paradigm of micro-studies' in the modern history of India. But, when we observe minutely, we find that even these scholars didn't make any major change in their approach and analysis. They simply presented the views of old Cambridge school in a polished manner. In fact, except Christopher Bayly, almost all the Neo-Cambridge scholars denied the phenomenon of nationalism in India. Furthermore, they too tried to interpret the changes in India in the context of the interests of Indian elites.

### 2. Nationalist School of Historiography

This school of thought developed as a reaction to the imperialist school. Surendra Nath Banerjee, R.G Pradhan and A.K. Majumdar etc. were associated with this school. Presently, Amlsh Tripathi is promoting this school. This school tried to establish that the colonialism existed in India as a socio-economic and political phenomenon. Likewise, there was the rise of nationalism in India with the spread of patriotic ideas. They pointed out that there was a basic contradiction in the colonial structure, between the British colonial interest and the interest of Indian people. But, this school had its limitations as well i.e. they neglected the social realities in India. In other words, they were inclined to prove that there was a conflict of interests between the British and the Indians, but they assumed that the interests of all section of Indians was one and same, which was not correct.

This discrepancy was highlighted by the new interpretations of the changes that were taking place in the Indian society at that time. These new interpretations emphasised that the politicization of Indian society happened along the lines of traditional social identities, such as linguistic regions, castes or religious communities and not, in the modern sense of 'class' or 'nation'. The most important catalysts of change in this context were the institutional innovations of colonial state like the introduction of western education and political representation etc.

### **3. Marxist school of Historiography**

Marxist school tried to bring certain corrections in the nationalist approach. According to these scholars, there was not a single contradiction, rather there was a dual contradictions, namely primary contradiction and secondary contradiction. The primary contradiction existed between the British colonial interest and the interest of Indian people and the secondary contradiction existed within the Indian society itself i.e. between the capitalist and the proletariat, the landlords and the peasants, different religious sects etc. There were some scholars like M.N. Roy, R.P. Dutta and Desai etc. who adopted a more mechanical approach in their analysis. Even if there were a primary contradiction, they were tempted to project it as a secondary contradiction. Later, some other Marxist scholars like Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee etc. tried to establish a balance between the interpretations of primary contradiction and secondary contradiction. This school recognizes the legitimacy of nationalism, but doesn't ignore the internal tensions within it.

### **4. Subaltern School**

The term 'subaltern' was coined by an Italian Marxist scholar, 'Antonio Gramsci'. Later, it developed as an Indian school of historiography under Ranjit Guha (1980s). Then, Partha Chatterjee also contributed to it. According to this school, whether it was the imperialist school, the nationalist school or the Marxist school, all of them suffered from a common problem i.e. all of them gave too much emphasis over the role of leadership in a movement. On the other hand, the subaltern school gave emphasis over the social processes instead of the role of leadership. It believes that it is not the leaders that control the masses, rather it is the masses, which guide the leader. However, this school has undergone a considerable shift in the recent years, with its focus moving from the class to the community, from the material analysis to the privileging of culture, mind and identity. Dipesh Chakrabarty justifies this shift by arguing that the elite and dominant groups can also have a subaltern past. Their subaltern-ness was constituted through the colonisation of their mind.

### **5. Other Schools**

There was a range of other schools of thought which defined the Indian nationalism from diverse ideological points and perspectives of historiography. It is now argued that the forms of anti-colonial resistance and the ideologies that were behind them, were visualized or constructed in multiple ways. India was a plural society, therefore, Indian nationalism was bound to have many

voices, as different classes, groups, communities and regions interpreted their 'Nation' in various, and sometimes even contradictory, ways.

## **Origin and development of European trade in India**

1. The decline of Constantinople blocked all the trading routes between India and Europe. So, the merchants from Geneva and Venice monopolized the trade as the distributors of Indian spices and other oriental products in Europe. This certainly created jealousy among the other European countries.
2. Thus started the voyages for discovery of alternative routes to India. It was in this context that the American continent was discovered by Columbus in 1492 CE and the sea-route to India was discovered by Vasco-da-Gama in 1498 CE. Although, the discovery of America was accidental, it had a huge significance in the world history, i.e. without the supply of precious metals from America, European merchants could not have financed their Indian trade.
3. The discovery of alternative routes to India solved some of the challenges that had existed in the earlier route through Red Sea. One major constraint on that route was the stretch of land between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.
4. At that time, some ambitious merchants emerged in Europe which emphasised over financing sea voyages.
5. This period was marked by the expansion of European economy. As a result of this expansion, a prosperous middle class emerged which intensified the demand of Indian products.
6. Furthermore, some technological advancements were made in the field of navigation during this period. For example, the use of compass became common. Ambitious monarchs supported the rational enquiry, e.g. Henry, the navigator.

### **Portuguese:**

#### **Policy of Portuguese company:**

1. By monopolizing trade in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, Portuguese formed a large economic empire in Asia that was known as 'Estado-Da- India'.
2. Portuguese hampered the prevailing Indian norm of open seas and introduced the so-called 'Cartaze' system. Under this system, the Indian ships were supposed to get a permit from the Portuguese, else they were drowned.
3. Apart from trade, Portuguese merchants were involved in piracy as well.
4. Portuguese even showed religious bigotry and undertook forcible conversions.

#### **The reasons behind the decline of Portuguese power in relation to British and Dutch companies:**

1. Portugal, a smaller country, lacked resources to maintain rivalries with other Europeans.
2. Portuguese society was feudal in character. The dominance of aristocratic class on the middle class was visible. This subordinated 'merchant class' could not face the more empowered middle class of Britain.

3. Portuguese company did not enjoy the support from its government as we find in the case of British and Dutch company.
4. In 1580 CE, Portugal was conquered by Spain. So, it became a part of Spanish Empire. So far as the Spain could maintain its supremacy on the seas, even Portugal was in a strong position. But, once the Spanish were defeated by the British in 1588 CE, they lost their naval supremacy. Consequently, even Portugal lost out.

**‘Trade revolution of 17<sup>th</sup> century and the consequent changes:**The trade revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had following features:

1. Up to this point, Portuguese companies mainly focused over the export of spices from India, but the British and Dutch companies diversified this trade and exported new products like textiles as well.
2. The Portuguese company was confined to the south-western coast of India (Malabar region) only, but the British and Dutch expanded to the Coromandal Coast, the Bengal coast and the Gujarat coast.
3. The British and Dutch companies were not confined to the coastal regions.They expanded into the interior regions as well e.g. Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Agra in northern India.
4. The Portuguese company was simply involved in the distribution of products. But, the British and Dutch companies were not satisfied with the distribution. As they needed larger quantities of the finished goods, so they got involved into the production also.

#### **Change in the composition of trade**

1. The Portuguese were involved mainly in the export of spices. But, the British and Dutch companies traded in a variety of items e.g. cotton, silk goods, raw cotton, saltpeter and opium etc. Also, silver was the main import by the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (horse in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century).
2. During the first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century, spices were the main item of export from India. But, during the second half of century, main items of export were the cotton and the silk clothes. The contribution of spices in the total export declined from 74% to 23%, whereas the contribution of cotton and silk increased from 16% to 55% in the period.
3. During this period, European and Asian trade respectively expanded. In the European trade, the British company made a major contribution, and in the Asian trade, the Dutch company played a significant role. For example, the Dutch company used to exchange the Indian clothes with the spices in South East Asia. They used to export cotton clothes from the Coromandel Coast and the Gujarat coast to the South East Asia and used its profits for purchasing the products from South East Asia. Apart from that, the Dutch company used to export opium from the Bengal to the South East Asia and raw silk from the Bengal to the Japan.

**The role of Dutch Company in the Indian trade in 17<sup>th</sup> century:**During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch created a big market in the Asia, especially in the South East Asia, for the Indian products. They used this Indian trade to finance their spice trade in the South East Asia.

1. They exported large quantities of cotton textiles from Coromandal and Gujarat to South East Asia.
2. They exported opium and raw silk from Bengal to the South East Asia and to Japan respectively.

#### **British East India Company in India**

1. The British East India Company was formed in the London in 1600 CE, with the encouragement of Queen Elizabeth. Its aim was to control the trade of East. The Queen believed that the trade and naval power could make Britain powerful.

2. William Hawkins arrived in the court of Jahangir as an ambassador of East India Company in 1608 CE. He came to seek the permission to set up a factory in India, which Jahangir gave. Agra was the site for this factory. But, under the Portuguese pressure, this permit was withdrawn. The British got the permit to setup a factory at Surat only after they had defeated the Portuguese in the battle of Swally in 1612 CE.
3. Thomas Roe arrived in the Mughal court as a direct representative of the British king James II in 1615 CE. This was the start of a new phase in the Mughal-British relations. The British company got the permission to open factories at various places in India.
4. There was an incidence of conflict as well during this period. Due to the arrogance of company officers, they were punished by the Subedar of Bengal in 1686 CE. But, they were pardoned after they apologized. Then, Fort William was established with the efforts of Job Charnock, a British officer in 1690s, which would go onto become the centre of British Empire in Asia.

**The French ambition of building a territorial empire in India:** The French East India Company was launched in 1664 CE at the initiative of Colbert, the finance minister of Louis IV. In 1667 CE, the French established their first factory at Surat. Though, the French arrival was rather late, they consolidated their position in India within a short span of time. Initially, the French company didn't have any political ambition. But, with arrival of Dupleix, they started formulating imperialist designs in India. The growing political ambition of the French company and the shifting political alignments in Europe infused tensions in their relationship with the English.

### Carnatic Wars

The conflict for supremacy between the British and the French started in the South India. This conflict resulted into the Carnatic Wars.

#### **Causes behind the Carnatic Wars:**

1. Both, the British and French were inclined to establish their trade monopoly over the South India.
2. Both, French and British companies had some political ambitions as well.
3. The Carnatic wars involved the European question also. In other words, a conflict started between the British and the French in Europe and got extended into India also.

#### **First Carnatic War (1744- 1748 CE):**

It was an extension of a European war. In India, the British company initiated the conflict, but soon, it received setbacks. Then, even the *Nawab* of Carnatic, Anwar Uddin, intervened into the matter. But, the French power could not be subdued. The battle of Saint Thome, which took place in 1746 CE, is a watershed in the Indian history. It was fought between the French East India Company and the Nawab of Carnatic. This battle proved the superiority of military techniques of Europeans vis-a-vis the Indian states. Finally, peace was concluded between the British and the French in 1748 CE.

#### **Second Carnatic War (1749-1754 CE):**

This war started due to an Indian question, through which, both the European companies tried to fulfill their political ambitions. A war of succession had started in the two Indian states, Hyderabad and Carnatic, and both the companies intervened into the matter. As a final result of this war, Hyderabad state fell under the control of French while the Carnatic came under the control of British.

#### **Third Carnatic War (1758-1763 CE):**

Once again, this war was an extension of a European conflict. In Europe, the seven years war (1756- 1763 CE) had started and it got extended to India also. The French government sent a military officer, Count-de Lally, to lead the French in India. But, Count-de-Lally could not manage the

situation successfully. French lost the control over Hyderabad and eventually lost the war. In 1760 CE, in the battle of Wandiwash, the British forces under Sir Eyre Coote completely routed the French under Count-de-Lally.

### **Reasons behind the failure of French company:**

1. The British company was much ahead of the French company in military expertise, resources and enthusiasm.
2. The British company was commercially more successful than the French company.
3. The British company got the services of competent officers like Sir Eyre Coote, Robert Clive and others. Except Dupleix, French Company did not enjoy the services of any other competent officer.
4. The British Company was autonomous in taking decisions as it was a joint stock company. But, the French company had to function under the strict control of French government.
5. Resources of Bengal had fell into the hands of British after the battle of Plassey.

### **French lost their edge, once and forever, after the British takeover of Bengal:**

French company had finally lost India in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carnatic War. So, with their limited resources in India, it was nearly impossible for them to compete with the British company which already had the command of seas and after the battle of Plassey, it held the vast resources of Bengal. But, it was another matter that the British subordinated a large number of Indian states on the pretext of French menace. Up to the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, British power was deeply entrenched in India. It was controlling the most prosperous province of India i.e. Bengal. Apart from that, it was in a strategically advantageous position as the area from Ormuz to Malacca was under the British control. So, the French menace was not a real issue before the British. But, the company under Lord Wellesley made it a ruse to extend its authority on the Indian states. So, the subsidiary alliance system was introduced to extend the British control over Indian states.

In this way, the contest between French and British companies lost its relevance up to the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Nature of British conquest in India:**

The nature of British conquest of India is a controversial issue in the modern historiography. On the one hand, the British apologist scholars tried to prove that the British did not have any intention to conquer India and India was conquered unintentionally. On the other hand, some ultra nationalist scholars tried to prove that the British company conceived a plan to conquer India just after its arrival in India. But, when we observe closely, we find that the truth lies between these two extremes. It is not justified to say that the British company conceived a plan to conquer India just after its formation as it could not think over this option in the presence of mighty Mughal Empire. It started its career just as a trading company. But, in the due course of time, it developed its political ambitions. This was due to two factors. Firstly, disintegration of the Mughal Empire created a power vacuum which the company tried to fill up. Secondly, the company was trying to mobilize the resources from India in order to finance its trade. With this purpose, it modified its policy with respect to the Indian states from time to time and it was from 1813 CE onwards that it emphasized on the policy of direct annexation of Indian states. So, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a big British empire was created due to the policy of annexation which was guided by a strong colonial motive. In fact, on the basis of the Charter act of 1813 CE, India had to be developed as a market for the British manufactured goods. With this purpose, more and more Indian states were brought under a direct British control.

So, it is not justified to say that the British conquered India in a fit of absent mindedness. The British company was aware of its policies and their impacts. If there was absent mindedness, it was on the part of Indian states and not on the part of British company.

## **Relation between the British company and Nawab of Bengal, and the Battle of Plassey:**

1. Right from the time of Murshid Quli Khan, there was a bone of contention between the British company and the Nawab, i.e. the misuse of '*dastak*'. The '*dastak*' was misused in following ways:
  - a. This *dastak* was originally given to the company, but even the private British merchants/company officials were using this '*dastak*' for their private trade.
  - b. Company officials used to sell this *dastak* to the Indian merchants also. This caused revenue loss to the Nawab.
2. In spite of the differences with the British company, almost all the Nawabs from Murshid Quli Khan to Alivardi Khan had adopted a moderate approach towards the British company. But, Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah adopted an aggressive approach towards the British company. In fact, Siraj-Ud-Daulah was upset at the British behaviour from the time of his coronation itself, because the Company sided with Nawab's rival group i.e. Shaukat Jung.
3. Fortification of Fort William became an issue between the Nawab and the British company. Nawab asked to demolish the fort but the company refused to comply with the order. So, Nawab invaded the fort William and plundered it in 1756 CE.
4. Then, Robert Clive won over some of the Nawab's officers like Mir Bakshi, Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh (officer in charge of the fort William), Manik Chand (a merchant of Bengal), Omichand (a banker of Bengal) and Fateh Chand etc.
5. Later, the British company under Robert Clive captured the French factory of Chandra Nagar in 1757 CE. It was a direct challenge to the sovereign power of Nawab. This became the immediate cause of the battle of Plassey. Robert Clive met Nawab's forces in the battle of Plassey which he easily won. This battle is a unique story of betrayal in the modern Indian history.

### **Impact of the Battle of Plassey (Significance)**

1. The new Nawab, Mir Jafar was compelled to offer a large amount of 1 crore 77 lacks rupee to the British company. Apart from that, Robert Clive himself received 2 lakh rupees.
2. British company started to eliminate its European rivals from Bengal one by one. Furthermore, company started to tightly control the artisans of Bengal through its 'gumasthas' (Indian agents of British East India Company).
3. After the Battle of Plassey, the impoverishment of Bengal started.
4. The Battle of Plassey laid down the foundations of a new relation between the Nawabs and the company. Now, the company was playing the role of king maker.

### **Differences between Mir Jafar and British (1757-1760 CE)**

The British company got disenchanted with the new Nawab and his ways. There were two main reasons for this:

- a. The British were not satisfied with the financial returns they were getting from the Nawab.
- b. The British suspected that Mir Jafar was in the secret talks with the Dutch.

So, the British Governor, Vansittart concluded a secret deal with Mir Qasim. According to this deal, Mir Qasim had to offer 29 lakh rupees to the British company along with the districts of Midnapore, Vardhaman and Chittagong. In return, the post of Nawab was offered to Mir Qasim.

Vansittart characterized this event as the '**Bengal Revolution**'. But, the term revolution seems to be a misnomer. It was just a change of one puppet Nawab with another puppet Nawab. The actual strings of government remained in the hands of company. The company continued to play the role of a king maker. Another precondition for terming any event as a revolution is the popular