Lecture 3
Bengal Under East India Company

Introduction

1. The East India Company (EIC) was a British, joint-stock company founded in 1600 with the aim of trading in the Indian Ocean region. They landed in the Indian sub-continent as traders of spices in 1608 at the port of Surat. It was granted permission to trade at Hugli in Bengal in 1651. By 1668 they had a good number of establishments all over Bengal.

2. The Company was granted exemption from paying customs duties in Bengal in 1691. The company extended its influence by purchasing the *zamindari* of three villages Kalikata, Sutanuti and Govindapur. Establishment of Fort William in the then Calcutta and turning it into an independent Presidency in 1700 followed these events.

Reasons Leading to Battle of Plassey

3. Siraj-Ud-Daula succeeded his grandfather Alivardi Khan to become the Nawab of Bengal. Major reasons leading to the battle of Plassey were:

a. The officials of the Company made rampant misuse of its trade privileges that adversely affected the nawab's finances.

b. Non-payment of tax and duty by the workers of the British East India Company.

c. An asylum was provided by the company to Nawab's enemy Krishnaballav.

d. The Britishers fortified Fort Williams without the permission of Nawab.

e. All these acts of the company infuriated Siraj-ud-Doula. He marched to Fort Williams and captured 146 Britishers and imprisoned them in a small room due to which 123 Britishers died. This incident is known as "Black Hole Tragedy of Calcutta".

Battle of Plassey

4. Following the 'Black Hole Tragedy' Robert Clive was sent to recapture Calcutta. He along with Admiral Watson recaptured it and entered into a treaty with the Nawab. Clive also became the Governor of the Select Committee of Fort William. Taking the advantage of a clique in the Darbar of the Nawab Clive entered into a secret treaty where he promised kinship to Mir Jafar, the commander-in-chief of the Nawab's army, in return for his betrayal to Nawab.

5. According to the plan of the conspiracy the battle of Palashi on the banks of Bhagirathi river near Calcutta was staged on June 23, 1757. Sirajuddaula was defeated comprehensively and later captured and killed by Mir Jafar's son, Miran.

6. **Aftermath of the Battle of Plassey**.

a. The British East India Company started ruling Bengal keeping a puppet Nawab. After the battle of Buxar in 1764 the company was awarded the diwani of Bengal and Robert Clive became the first Governor of Bengal.

b. Initially the tax collection was left in the hands of the existing hereditary collectors. In 1772, under Warren Hastings, the East India Company took over revenue collection directly in the Bengal Presidency

e. The company started imposing severe rules and regulations on the inhabitants of Bengal in the name of tax collection.

f. The rich revenues of Bengal enabled them to organise a strong army to meet the cost of the conquest of the rest of the country.

Famine of 1769

7. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770, referred to as the ‘Chiyattorer Monnontor’ was a catastrophic famine that affected the lower Gangetic plain between 1769 and 1773. The famine is believed to have caused the death of an estimated 10 million people, approximately one-third of the population at the time. Major reasons of the famine were:

a. Complete failure of crops production in 1768 and 1769 in Bengal due to drought. There was also an outbreak of small pox in Murshidabad.

b. Raising taxes to meet the extra military expenditure., Company had doubled their military expenses from 1764 to 1770.

c. Company’s merchant monopolizing the rice market was another strong reason for the famine.

8. **Company’s Response to the Famine**.

a. The Company claimed that the cause for this famine was natural. So instead of helping people during the famine they were busy in maximizing their profit.

b. All the previous rulers had tried their best to help people during natural calamities. However, the British were raising taxes and forced people to pay taxes. In 1770–71, when the famine was in peak, an astounding amount of £1,086,255 was transferred to London by Company executives.

Small Scale Revolts against Company's Rule

9. The adverse impact of the British rule on the political, economic and social spheres resulted in sharp reaction of the Indian people against the foreigners. This led to a series of the anti-British movements throughout the country. Peasants and tribes rebelled against exploitative rulers.

10. **Fakir – Sanyasi Resistance (1760 to 1800)**. Fakir-Sannyasi Resistance was an armed resistance of the combined body of Muslim fakirs (sufis) and Hindu sannyasis (yogis) against the dominance of the English East India Company in Bengal. Prominent leaders were Fakir Majnu Shah, Bhabani Pathak, Pargal Shah etc.

11. **Rangpur Farmers' Movement 1783**. The Rangpur farmers' rebellion known as Rangpur Dhing took place in 1783. It was a protest by the peasants and the Zamindars against the very high demands of revenue by the Company.

12. **Faraizi Movement 1820 to 1862**.

a. The Faraizi Movement against the oppressive domination of Hindu zamindars and European indigo planters was founded by Haji Shariatullah, which became very popular among the Muslim peasantry in various districts of Bengal.

b. After the death of Haji Shariatullah, his son, Dudu Miyan, transformed the Faraizi Movement from being socio-religious to socio-economic-political character. The movement spread from Dhaka and Faridpur to Bakerganj, Cumilla, Mymensingh, Jashore, Khulna and large parts of South 24 Parganas.

13. **Titumir's rebellion in West Bengal 1831**. Titu Mir was a peasant leader who resisted the oppression of the local zamindars and European indigo planters on the peasantry. Titu Mir built a strong fort with bamboo poles at Narkelbaria in October 1831 that became an icon of anti-colonial movements.

Major Revolts

14. Sepoy Mutiny, 1857.

a. Sepoy mutiny was a rebellion against British rule by a large part of the Bengal army in India. Cartridges for the soldiers' new Enfield rifles were lubricated with grease. To load the rifle the sepoys had to bite off the ends of the cartridges. The sepoys believed that the lubricant was a mixture of pig and cow lard, a religious insult to both Muslims and Hindus. On March 29, 1857, on the parade ground at Barrackpore, a sepoy named Mangal Pandey rebelled by shooting a British sergeant-major and a lieutenant. Soon the mutiny spread to Meerut, Delhi and other parts of India. Infuriated Sepoys marched to Delhi and restored the former Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, to power.

b. It created serious tension throughout Bengal. The resistance in Chattogram and Dhaka and skirmishes at Sylhet, Jessore, Rangpur, Pabna and Dinajpur had left Bengal in a state of alert and excitement.

c. British reinforcements were quickly sent against the Sepoy Revolt. The British recaptured Delhi in the summer of 1857. Peace was officially declared on July 8. Nevertheless, brutal reprisals went on for months afterward.

d. After the rebellion the British reorganized the army. Following the fighting of 1857–58, the East India Company was abolished and India was legally considered a colony of Britain, ruled by a viceroy.

15. Indigo Rebellion.

a. The Indigo Rebellion (Neel Bidroho), a revolt by the farmers against British indigo planters, took place in Bengal in 1859-60.

b. Indigo cultivation started in Bengal in 1777. European planters enjoyed a monopoly over indigo and they forced Indian farmers to grow indigo instead of food crops. The farmers were brutally oppressed if they refused to do so.

c. In April 1860, the farmers of the districts of Nadia and Pabna went on a strike and refused to grow indigo that spread to other parts of Bengal. The farmers were led by the Biswas brothers of Nadia, Rafiq Mondal of Malda and Kader Molla of Pabna.

d. The rebellion was backed by the Bengali intelligentsia. The play *Nil Darpan* by Dinabandhu Mitra written in 1858–59 portrayed the farmers' plight accurately. Michael Madhusudan Dutta translated the play into English.

e. The revolt was a success despite its brutal quelling by the government. By the end of 1860, indigo cultivation was literally washed away from Bengal.