

BRITISH INDIA—ERA SUMMARY

BRITISH EMPIRE—1526 TO 1914

BABER FOUNDS MOGUL EMPIRE TO FIRST WORLD WAR

The East India Company, which originally set up British trading centers in Asia, was first chartered by [Elizabeth I](#) in 1600. It was not uncommon for European governments to charter private companies to establish colonies—many of the thirteen American colonies had started out as such. These quasi-governmental institutions had the right to make autonomous decisions and to defend their interests in far flung regions, but were required to make a report to their sovereign and have their charter extended every twenty to thirty years.

Carnatic Wars and British Conquest of Bengal—During the first 150 years of its existence, the British East India Company established several trading posts in India, first at Surat; then at Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. During most of this time, much of India was ruled by the [Great Mogul Jehanijir](#), who was on good terms with the traders, but the Mughal empire was in decline, there was [strife between Hindus and Moslems](#), and other trading companies, from Portugal, Holland and France, competed with the British for trade in India. After the death of [Aurangzeb](#), much of the power of the Mughal Empire devolved to local princes, and these princes, who were often at war with each other, were aware of the advantages of western military power. The French, under [Dupleix](#), governor at Pondicherry, were particularly astute at making alliances with the Indian Princes (Nawabs), and in a short time the French were the predominant power in Bengal. When the [War of the Austrian Succession](#) broke out in Europe, the French used the opportunity to attempt to drive England from India altogether, and thus began the [Carnatic Wars](#).

At this point, there appeared on the scene, [Robert Clive](#), a lowly and miserable company clerk, stationed at Madras, with no military experience. When the French besieged *Ft. David*, he distinguished himself with such valor, that a few years later the Company entrusted him to embark on a nearly hopeless quest, to take the enemy capital of *Arcot*. In spite of tremendous odds, Clive took and held Arcot, and greatly improved Britain's standing among the local princes, whose main concern was to make alliances with the predominant European power. Although Dupleix was a brilliant statesman, his generals were no match for the youthful and fearless Clive. Six years, and many battles later, he had greatly improved Britain's reputation with the local princes. Finally, in 1757, at



CITY OF DELHI

the *Battle of Plassey*, Clive won a brilliant victory over a combined French and native force fifty thousand strong, with only 800 British, and 2000 Native troops. From this point on, Britain controlled Bengal, the richest province of India, and was the most influential foreign power in the entire region.

The first few years of the British rule in Bengal, however, were utterly miserable. The East India Company was accustomed to trade and to fight, but not to govern or bring justice to a foreign country. These duties were neglected, to the near ruin of the country, until [Warren Hastings](#) was appointed the first Governor of all British Provinces in India, but only after a terrible famine had brought the problems to a crisis point. Hastings was a very controversial governor, and though he did much to improve the situation, many problems were left unresolved, and he made powerful enemies. He ruled for twelve years, but upon his return home was tried for corruption and acquitted after a contentious trial. Whether or not he deserved to be condemned, his highly publicized trial raised many of the problems of the British rule in India to the public eye.

Expansion of British Territory in India—Several well-known Indian governors followed, including [General Cornwallis](#), of American Revolutionary fame, and [Marquess Wellesley](#), an elder Brother of the [Duke of Wellington](#). Britain continued to bring more of India under its sway. In some case, as in the [Mysore Wars](#) against [Tipu Sultan](#), they conquered a Nawab and annexed his region. In other cases, they simply made a "mutual defense" treaty with a local prince that gave Britain great advantages. Finally, a policy was established that in cases when no direct heir was left to a region, Britain annexed the area, and appointed its own governor. Yet expansion did not bring peace, nor did it bring good government. The British government continued to put more constraints on the East India Company to curb abuses, but there was not a clear consensus about what the ruling policy should be—only a consensus that more money should be raised. Yet the goals of ruling India well, and at the same time extracting money from her, were at cross purposes.

After numerous missteps, years of misrule, several rebellions and mutinies, and numerous wars against the [Marathas](#), [Gurkhas](#), and [Burmah](#), the British government reformed the East India Company to such an extent that it was no longer allowed to carry on trade at all, and was to focus only on more effective government of the provinces. Indian ports were thrown open to merchants of every country so in this way, the native Indians were not cheated by traders who held a monopoly. This reform occurred in 1833 and was part of the "free trade" movement that was being gradually implemented throughout the growing empire. Soon after, [Lord Dalhousie](#) became was appointed Governor and was one of the best rulers of India. He expanded British territory, adding the Punjab to British domains, but accomplished it in such a way that the [Sikhs](#), or native Punjabis, became loyal British subjects, instead of seething rebels. He also built many roads, railways, and telegraphs, which greatly improved communication in the region.

Indian Mutiny—Yet just when conditions had begun to improve in India, disasters struck. First, in 1841, due to some foolish statesmanship, the British forced an unpopular ruler on [Afghanistan](#), and stationed thousands of British soldiers along with their families in Kabul. In the

middle of winter, the garrison was surrounded and forced to retreat from through Khyber Pass on its way back to India. Of the entire garrison of ten thousand, only one man survived to tell the tale. It was the worst massacre in British Imperial History. Fifteen years later, the [Indian Mutiny](#) broke out in *Cawnpore*, *Lucknow*, and *Delhi*. It was an enormous disaster that cost thousands of lives, and nearly succeeded in driving Britain from Indian soil. But after many atrocities and heroics, the British forces with their loyal Indian allies prevailed, and after consolidating their power, embarked on several important reforms, with the hope of preventing future outbreaks. It was at this time that the East India Company was completely dissolved, and the British Government took full responsibility for development of the Indian colonies.