

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The British Empire

Episode 2 – How did the East India Company take control of India?

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is BBC Bitesize History.

Datshiane: This is the second episode in an eight-part series on the British Empire.

Katie: In this episode we look at how Britain took control of India through the East India Company.

Datshiane: We'll look at its origins and development and how its role shifted from trading to ruling, as well as the rebellions against its policies and eventual legacy.

Katie: It might help if you have something to make notes on and do feel free to press stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: We'll also share revision hints and tips on how to remember those key facts, and we'll be sending our Bitesize travelling reporter back to a key moment in history.

Datshiane: So, the topic of British colonization in India, Katie, where do we start?

Katie: Well, British interests in India started with the East India Company, a British trading company who ended up ruling a nation.

Datshiane: Okay, so that is fascinating that it was a company, not an army, that can end up ruling a nation.

Katie: Absolutely, let's see how that happened.

Datshiane: So, the East India Company, or EIC, was established by a royal charter in 1600, which is like it gave permission from Queen Elizabeth the First, so their original goal was to trade in spices, silks and other goods from the East Indies, which is modern day Indonesia. However, they soon found there was a lot more money to be made in India from the abundance of wealth of India's resources of cotton, tea and spices, which they could exploit for huge profits. Now, over time, the EIC expanded its influence by establishing trading posts and ports in key locations.

Katie: Factories appeared at these trading stations making goods from the raw materials. Cotton was woven and sent to Britain in huge quantities to supply the demand for this new fabric. Opium, an addictive drug, was also grown and sold by the East India Company in China at a huge profit.

Datshiane: The East India Company continued to get bigger and bigger. It was built on exploitation, theft, and cultivating drugs, and as a result it developed power and influence in India. The East India Company changed from trading to a ruling company, and it did this in three ways. Katie, tell us how we can remember this.

Katie: Okay so I'm going to suggest the letters MPR, so grab that pen and write this down to help you remember. M is for military power: the East India Company developed a private army, one of the largest armies in the world, to protect its interests; P is for political influence: the company began to involve itself in local politics forming alliances with powerful people and local princes, and taking sides in regional conflicts; and R is revenue collection: the EIC started collecting taxes and administering justice in the areas under its control, effectively becoming a governing body.

Datshiane: Katie, I think we need to talk about Robert Clive. Now, he was one of the key British officers who was important in establishing British control in India in the 1700s.

Katie: In 1757, he led British forces against the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah. Nawab means prince. The Nawab of Bengal had seized the British settlement at Calcutta, and was more sympathetic to the French Trading Company. Clive, with a smaller but well-disciplined army, bribed the Indian generals to betray the Nawab during the Battle of Plassey.

Datshiane: This was a decisive victory for the East India Company, as it allowed it to gain control over Bengal and its vast resources, and they used this as a base to extend their influence over other parts of this region of India. From then on, the East India Company began to control the government, economy, and education system of India.

Katie: The Battle of Plassey was significant in the expansion of the East India Company rule and British colonialism, so it might be useful to grab your note-taking devices, and take some notes as to how this was a turning point in Indian rule.

Datshiane: Now, Clive was made Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Bengal, which was then one of the richest parts of India, and he oversaw the forcible theft of goods and crops from the region, and he made a personal fortune. His greed and mismanagement increased the devastation of the Bengal famine of 1770, in which about ten million people died. Clive was even criticised in Parliament in 1772 for corruption, yet despite all this the EIC continued to make massive profits, shipping its wealth back to Britain.

Datshiane: So, there's another key individual in the history of the East India Company, and that person is Warren Hastings, who was the first Governor General of India between 1773 and 1785. Hastings brought in administrative reforms, established a system of revenue collection, and promoted the study of Indian culture and languages. And he also created a system of dual governance where local Indian rulers maintained some power, but the real control lay with British officials. His policies helped solidify British control, and contributed to the continued economic exploitation of Indian resources.

Katie: Hastings was also keen to stop corruption within the East India Company itself and introduced the Regulating Act of 1773; this placed the company under supervision of the British Government for the first time. So, this act set the stage for the transformation of India into a colony directly ruled by Britain after the East India Company's dominance began to wane in the nineteenth century, as a result of events which we'll get to in a moment.

Datshiane: But we're not there yet, because by the mid-1800s the EIC controlled large parts of India, either directly or through puppet rulers.

Katie: So, these were rulers that were put in place and controlled by the East India Company.

Datshiane: Their expansion was created by both military campaigns and diplomatic alliances, and the company used various methods to gain control.

Katie: Treaties and alliances - they would make deals with Indian rulers offering them protection in exchange for influence over their territories.

Datshiane: Subsidiary alliances - Indian rulers had to accept British troops stationed in their states, and couldn't make treaties with anyone else without EIC permission.

Katie: Doctrine of Lapse - if an Indian ruler died without a male heir the EIC could take over their territory. Check out the Bitesize website for more on these alliances.

Datshiane: Thanks to the East India Company, much of India was controlled by the British by the 1850s. However, in 1857 a major rebellion in Bengal had profound consequences. It's time for us to check in with Jordan, our time-travelling Bitesize reporter who's there.

Jordan: Hi, Jordan here in 1857 Bengal, where tensions are at an all-time high, and there are rumours that the rebellion has spread across the country led by the Sepoys, the Indian soldiers who serve under British command. It started with a rumour - a new rifle cartridge coated in grease made from pigs and cows has sparked outrage among Hindu and Muslim soldiers. The idea of biting into it is seen as deeply offensive to their religious beliefs. In March, a sepoy, named Mangal Pandey, attacked his British officer, and was executed, but the fires of rebellion were lit. Two months later, and it had spread like wildfire, the sepoys turning against their officers, capturing territories, and in some cases killing their British superiors. I heard one sepoy shout that no one wants to be ruled by those who disrespect their faith. And I have seen banners saying that large rewards and high rank would be given by the King of Delhi to anyone who joins the rebellion. Will this rebellion be short lived? The toll is heavy with thousands of British and countless Indians dead, not only from battle, but also from the famine that grips the land. This is Jordan, reporting for Bitesize History. Back to the studio.

Katie: Thanks for that Jordan. So that animal fat-coated rifle cartridge was deeply offensive, and it triggered the uprising.

Datshiane: And as always in history there were other interlinking causes. The deep-seated problems were fuelled by decades of widespread discontent with British rule, including economic exploitation, cultural insensitivity, and military grievances.

Katie: The rebellion which began in Meerut on the 9th of May 1857 quickly spread across Northern and Central India, it involved sepoys, Indian princes, and even peasants joining in. The sepoys killed British officers, freed imprisoned sepoys and set fire to army barracks.

Datshiane: Soon, the whole of northern India was engulfed in rebellion, and it became what is now known as the First War of Independence in India, with major battles in Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow.

Katie: After 18 months of fighting, Britain defeated the sepoys. It is estimated that several thousand British soldiers were killed during the rebellion, while the estimates for the Indian death toll are in

the hundreds of thousands. Many British and Indian civilians were also killed in the violence, and many lives were also lost to a famine that occurred at the same time as the rebellion.

Datshiane: The rebellion was eventually suppressed by the British, but it led to significant changes in how India was governed. The British Government dissolved the EIC deciding that the company could no longer be trusted to rule India; then in August 1858 the Government of India Act was passed marking the beginning of the British Raj. A viceroy was put in charge of India on behalf of Queen Victoria, who was declared Empress of India in 1876.

Katie: So, an exam question might ask you to explain why the First War of Independence of 1857 was a turning point in the British Empire's control of India. Some exam boards might phrase it as the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. Have a go yourselves and think about what information you need to address, the causes of the rebellion, the turning points and the outcome. Press pause and have a go, or listen on as we have a wee think about that in five, four, three, two, one.

Datshiane: So, for cause you might include the resentment of British rule, economic exploitation and the Doctrine of Lapse amongst others.

Katie: Okay and what were the turning points?

Datshiane: Well, here you might want to include the controversial gun cartridges, cultural offence and the killing of the British soldier and execution of sepoys which escalated the violence.

Katie: And finally, its outcome.

Datshiane: Well, this would include the end of the East India Company, and direct rule from the British Crown and Queen Victoria who was made Empress of India.

Katie: Alright Datshiane, quick final summary of the East India Company please.

Datshiane: Sure thing.

Katie: The East India Company or EIC was established as a trading company to trade from India and Southeast Asia to Europe.

Datshiane: The company built a private army and gained military and political control over large parts of India.

Katie: The Battle of Plassey in 1757 marked a turning point by increasing EIC control when Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal.

Datshiane: The company policies worsened the Bengal famine of 1770, causing the deaths of millions.

Katie: The Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny, was a large-scale revolt against the company.

Datshiane: And following the rebellion the British Government dissolved the East India Company and took direct control of India, leading to the establishment of the British Raj.

Katie: So, the threads in this episode that we'll continue to see weave the series together, are how economics...

Datshiane: ...in this case to increase Britain's wealth...

Katie: ...resulted in the movement of people and goods...

Datshiane: ...initially by the East India Company...

Katie: - ...and led to colonisation and exploitation.

Datshiane: There's loads more on this and other history topics on the Bitesize website, as well as in other episodes in this series.

Katie: In the next episode we'll be looking at the loss of the American colonies and the American Revolutionary Wars.

Datshiane: See ya.