

The rise of the British Empire in India

Why Britain became a great empire.

Trade – making money for British companies

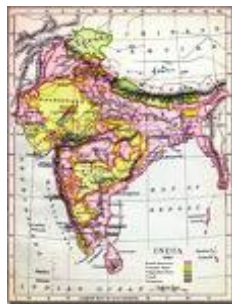
Politics – stopping other European powers developing their empires and becoming too powerful

Religion – trying to spread the Christian faith

Ambition – hoping to get rich easily or get a good job in the government of the empire

Adventure – wanting to learn about new lands and peoples

Land – hoping to settle down and start a new life in a new land



The rise of the British Empire in India

India, a densely populated place with long established civilisations, had a long history of contact with Europe. The main contact between Britain and India was in trade. This really began to develop during the 1600s, when the East India Company was created, a private company owned by wealthy and important figures in Britain. The Company had a monopoly of trade between Britain and Asia. The main goods traded were cotton, silk and tea. However, spices and gems were also important commodities.

The East India Company

The officials of the Company were almost like the rulers of a country. The Company had its own armed forces and could negotiate treaties. They worked closely with some Indian rulers, often helping them in their arguments or wars with other rulers. Throughout the 1600s and 1700s they took control of more and more Indian lands. In 1639 the British established control of Madras. In 1661 they gained control of Bombay - a very important port and trading centre.

In the 1690s the Company established and developed the port of Calcutta. From there British influence and control spread into the rich territories of Bengal.

As in North America, they had to fight with the French for power and influence there. The rivalry between Britain and France reached its peak in the 1750s in the Seven Years War. This was a complicated war as the French and British fought with each other, but they also allied with local Indian princes who fought each other as well. In 1756 Britain briefly lost control of Calcutta to the local Nawab (ruler) of Bengal but General Robert Clive recovered it in 1757. The decisive battle between the British and the French was at Wandiwash in 1760. The British victory at Wandiwash cleared the way for Britain to become the main European power in India.

The British took full advantage of this. By the 1780s they had a lot of influence over all of the rulers of the southeast coast of India. They also ruled Bengal. Bengal's large population and wealthy princes offered tremendous opportunities for the British East India Company and they built up their wealth and their military power there. By the 1780s the Company employed 15,000 British troops and over 70,000 Indian troops.



Arms of the East India Company

There is a lot of debate about how the British were able to gain the power and influence they did, because many of the Indian states were extremely well organised and powerful. Britain simply did not have the resources to invade India and conquer it by force. However, British leaders were very effective in choosing which princes they allied with, and which ones they fought.



During the Indian Rebellion of 1857 many Indians took up arms against the British. The army of predominantly peasant labourers from Bengal brought down British authority across Northern India. The cost in terms of human suffering was immense. It also meant that the East India Company became unsustainable and by 1858 it dissolved. The administration of India then became the responsibility of the Crown.



General Clive of the British East India Company gaining the right to collect taxes in Bengal in 1765