CHAPTER 4

The Colonial Era in India

Nearly two centuries ago the early Britons in Bengal and the sister Presidencies regarded the land and the people as fair game for plunder. ... Under the later Britons, as administrators ... the plunder is proceeding far more outrageously today than at any preceding period. ... Modern England has been made great by Indian wealth, ... wealth always taken by the might and skill of the stronger.

— William Digby (1901)



Fig. 4.1. A painting entitled 'The East offering its riches to Britannia', by a Greek painter, Spiridione Roma, 1778. (The painting is discussed later in the chapter.)

The Big Questions ?

1. *What is colonialism?*
2. *What drew European powers to India?*
3. *What was India's economic and geopolitical standing before and during the colonial period?*
4. *How did the British colonial domination of India impact the country?*

© NCERT not to be republished

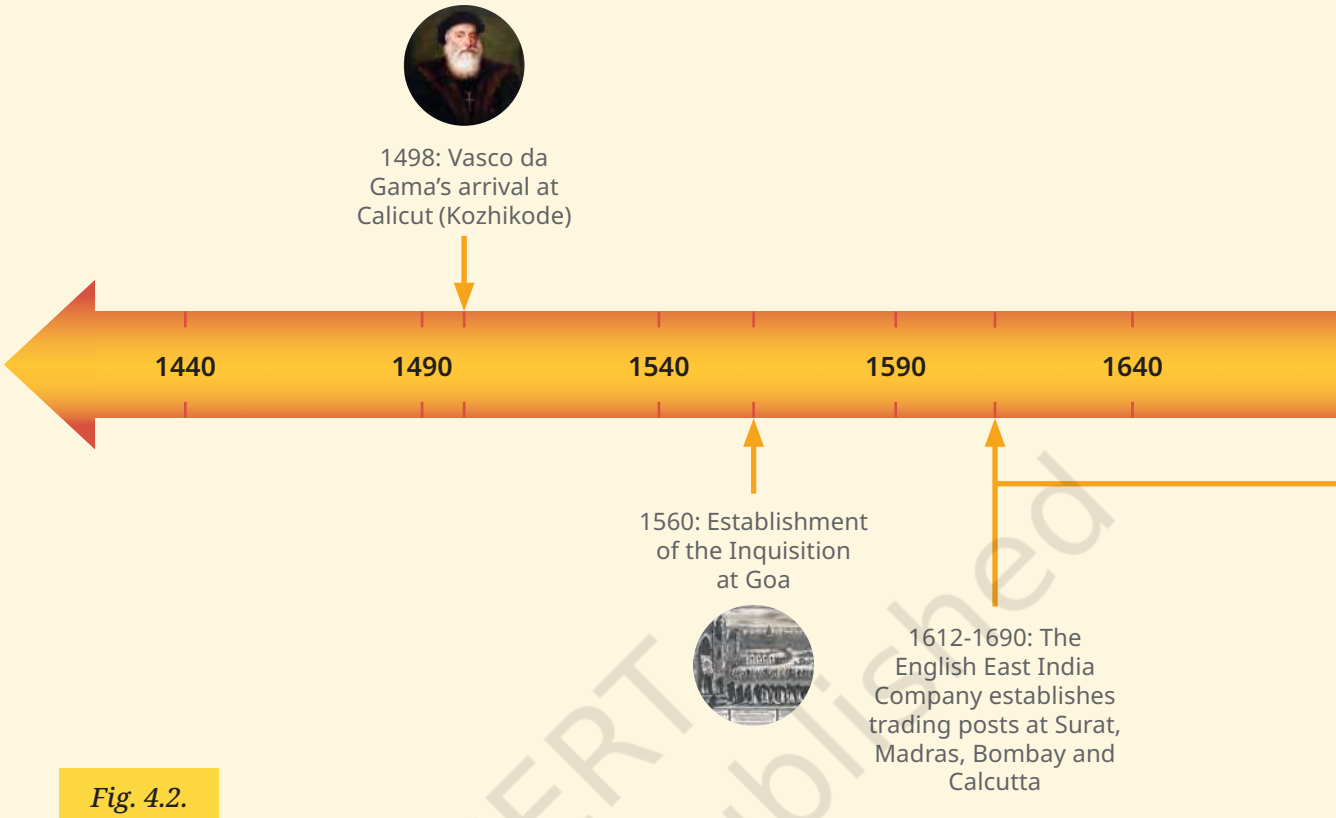


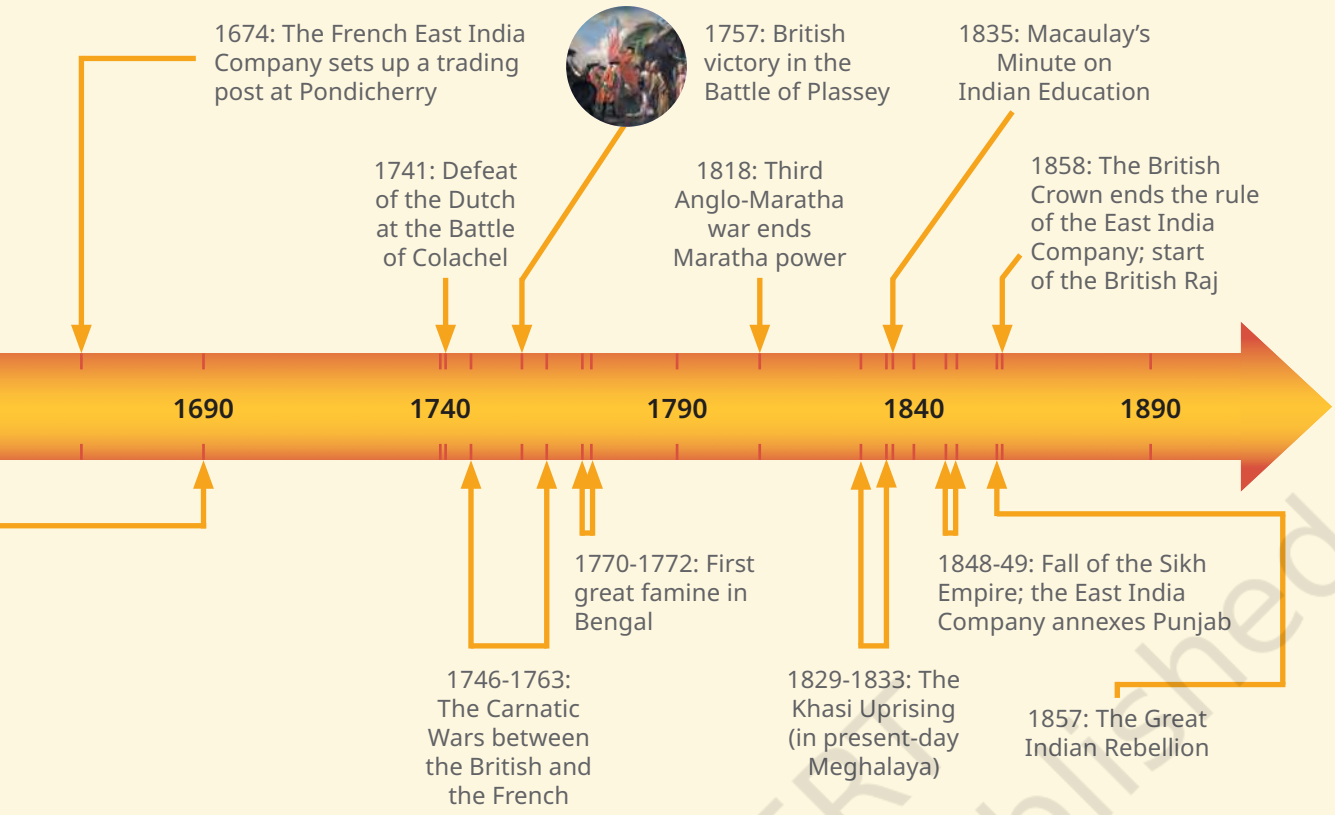
Fig. 4.2.

In the previous chapter, we saw the Marathas considerably weaken the Mughal Empire, before they themselves succumbed to the British forces early in the 19th century. And yet, military campaigns were only one factor in India becoming the 'jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire — indeed, the empire's largest colony.

The Age of Colonialism

Before we get there, we must step back a little in time and consider the phenomenon of colonialism. Its usual definition is the practice where one country takes control of another region, establishing settlements there, and imposing its political, economic, and cultural systems. This is not a recent occurrence: colonialism can be traced to the time of the great empires in the 1st millennium BCE; in the 1st millennium CE, the spread of Christianity and Islam also involved the colonisation of the territories converted to the new faiths.

© NCERT not to be republished



But the 'Age of Colonialism' usually refers to Europe's expansion from the 15th century onward, which, within a few centuries, extended to large parts of the world. As you will discover in higher grades, European powers — in particular, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and Netherlands — established colonies across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia and many Pacific islands, after conquering large parts of those regions of the world. Often, the conquests were achieved through military campaigns that involved the massacre or **enslavement** of native populations.

Enslavement: Turning someone into a slave.

What impelled those nations to undertake such campaigns? Political competition between European powers created a race for territorial expansion and global influence. Territorial expansion had obvious economic advantages: access to new natural resources, new markets and new trade routes — and, often, plunder, as we will see. Converting indigenous populations to Christianity was another powerful motivation. A lesser one, but significant nonetheless, was scientific inquiry — the

© NCERT not to be republished

Demonise: To falsely portray an individual or a group of people in a very negative light.

desire to explore unknown lands so as to accumulate knowledge of the planet's geography and natural history.

While colonisers often claimed they had the 'civilising mission' of bringing 'progress' to the colonised peoples, who were often **demonised** as 'savage', 'primitive' or 'barbaric', the reality was very different: loss of independence, exploitation of resources



Fig. 4.3. A cartoon depicting a British business magnate straddling Africa while he holds a telegraph wire (Edward Linley Sambourne in Punch magazine, London, 1892).

by the colonisers, the destruction of traditional ways of life, and the imposition of foreign cultural values. It is true that the colonial age brought the world together, saw a rapid growth of economies and technologies, but the benefits were mostly for the colonisers; many historical studies have documented the immense hardships that the colonised people had to endure.

© not to be republished

LET'S EXPLORE



What do you think the cartoon (Fig. 4.3) is trying to express? (Keep in mind that the telegraph, which permitted instant communications for the first time, was then a recent invention.) Analyse different elements of the drawing.

In many of the colonised regions, resistance built up against the colonisers. The phenomenon of colonialism declined in the mid-20th century, especially after World War II; many factors contributed to rapid worldwide decolonisation, with most colonised countries attaining independence. Here, however, we will focus on the special case of India.

EUROPEANS IN INDIA

India traded with the Greeks and the Romans over two millennia ago. Indian goods — spices, cotton, ivory, gems, sandalwood, teakwood, wootz steel, among other commodities — were highly sought after in the Mediterranean world. Until the 16th century CE, when European powers began sailing to the Indian Subcontinent, India was a vibrant economic and cultural powerhouse. Historical estimates (by economist Angus Maddison, in particular) suggest that India contributed at least one-fourth of the world **GDP** during this whole period, making it one of the two largest economies globally alongside China (whose contribution was of the same order). It is remarkable that from the 16th century onward, many European travellers to India described her as 'flourishing' and noted her manufacturing capabilities, diverse agricultural output, and extensive internal as well as external trading networks. However, this economic prosperity also made India an attractive target for European colonial ambitions.

GDP: Abbreviation of 'gross domestic product', a measure of the value of goods and services a country (or the world, in this case) produces in one year.

Let us survey Europe's first colonial powers in India.

The Portuguese: commerce and atrocities

The Portuguese explorer and navigator Vasco da Gama's arrival at Kappad (near Kozhikode in Kerala) in May 1498 paved the way for the beginning of European colonisation in India.

© NCERT not to be republished



A few centuries ago, the port town of Ullal (in present-day southern Karnataka) was an important trading point controlled by Rani Abbakka I. In the latter half of the 16th century, the Portuguese repeatedly attempted to take it over, but Rani Abbakka I formed strategic alliances with neighbouring kingdoms and thwarted their attempts. She was eventually captured and died fighting in prison. Her successor Rani Abbakka II is reported to have created fireballs out of coconut shells and set several ships of the Portuguese navy on fire. Their inspirational stories are remembered even today through the Yakṣhagāna, a traditional form of dance-drama.

Though he was well received, his aggressive ways failed to establish friendly relations with the local rulers. During his second voyage four years later, he seized, tortured and killed Indian merchants, and bombarded Calicut from the sea. The Portuguese captured strategic ports, including Goa (in 1510), which became the capital of their colony in India, as well as several trading posts along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts.

The Portuguese implemented a system known as *cartaz* (pass), requiring all ships in the Arabian Sea to purchase Portuguese permits for navigation. Ships without these permits were seized. This naval dominance allowed them to monopolise the spice trade between India and Europe for nearly a century.

Alongside commercial exploitation, the Portuguese presence in western India was characterised by religious persecution. In Goa, they established the **Inquisition** in 1560, which severely persecuted Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Christian converts suspected of practising their original faith. Such



Fig. 4.4. A plaque in Kozhikode marking Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498

Inquisition: A tribunal set up by the Roman Catholic Church to judge heretics (i.e. Christians suspected of holding opinions contrary to the Church's doctrine). Over some 600 years, across Europe many thousands of supposed heretics were tortured and executed.

© NCERT not to be republished

persecution was accompanied by forced conversions and the destruction of many Hindu temples, among other forms of abuse of the native population. (The Goa Inquisition was only abolished in 1812.)

The Dutch: commerce and competition

The Dutch arrived in India in the early 17th century and, unlike the Portuguese, focused primarily on commercial dominance, particularly in the spice trade. They established a Dutch East India Company, with trading posts in various parts of India, including, on the west coast, Surat, Bharuch, Cochin (Kochi), and on the east coast Nagapattinam and Masulipatnam (present-day Machilipatnam). Their most significant presence was in the Malabar region of Kerala, where they displaced the Portuguese from several trading centres.



Fig. 4.5. A depiction of the surrender of Dutch forces to King Marthanda Varma of Travancore after the Battle of Colachel, 1741 CE (Padmanabhapuram Palace).

© NCERT not to be republished

The Dutch presence in India was ultimately limited; it declined significantly after their defeat at the Battle of Colachel in 1741, where the forces of Travancore under King Marthanda Varma decisively defeated the Dutch both on land and at sea (the Travancore kingdom was in the southern part of present-day Kerala). This battle was a rare instance of an Asian power successfully repelling a European colonial force.

The French: colonial ambitions

The French entered India later, establishing their first trading post at Surat in 1668 and subsequently at Pondicherry (present-day Puducherry) in 1674, where they established their East India Company (*Compagnie des Indes Orientales*) and developed ambitious plans to establish a French empire in India.

Dupleix, who served as Governor-General of French India from 1742 to 1754, pioneered several colonial strategies that would later be adopted by the British. In particular, he trained Indian soldiers in European military techniques, creating disciplined infantry soldiers known as *sepoys*. Dupleix also developed the strategy of indirect rule through puppet Indian rulers, who were installed through interventions in local succession disputes.

The French colonial ambitions in India were ultimately checked during the Carnatic Wars (1746–1763), a series of conflicts between Britain and France. Despite initial successes under Dupleix, who captured Madras (present-day Chennai) in 1746, the French ultimately lost ground to the British and their colony was reduced to Pondicherry and a few smaller enclaves.

Like the Dutch, and unlike the Portuguese, the French colonial powers did not much intervene in Indians' social and religious life. A rare exception was the destruction in 1748 of Pondicherry's large Vedapurishwaran temple, ordered by Dupleix on the persistent request of Pondicherry's Jesuit priests and Dupleix's own wife, with a view to asserting the dominance of Christianity. Generally, however, the French had to be content with a modest amount of trade with India.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 4.6. A 1764 plan of Pondicherry showing the city enclosed in fortifications and grid planning. The large structure facing the sea (at the bottom) was the fort. (The top of the plan points to the west.)

Enter the British

Britain dominated the Indian subcontinent for nearly two centuries. How did this happen? Many books have dissected the methods of the British rulers; we will not attempt to tell a complete story, but will focus on the main aspects of their colonial presence in India.

© NCERT not to be republished

From traders to rulers

The British conquest of India is one of history's most remarkable examples of how a trading company could transform into an imperial power. Unlike classic conquests, the British takeover of India was gradual, calculated, and often disguised as commercial enterprise rather than military invasion.

The English East India Company was established as a trading company and was granted a royal charter by Queen Elizabeth I, which gave it special powers — to raise a private army, for instance. Nevertheless, its agents initially kept up a pretence of being mere traders, which allowed them, in the 17th century, to establish footholds along India's coast with minimal resistance: Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta among the first. Local rulers did not mind these trading posts, as they generally welcomed foreign trade (which, let us recall, was a longstanding practice in India). These modest beginnings concealed the Company's long-term ambitions.



LET US EXPLORE

Before you read further, have a good look at the painting on the first page of this chapter. It was specially ordered for the London headquarters of the East India Company and is over three metres long. Observe every aspect of it — the people in it, the objects, the symbols and the attitudes. Form groups of four or five students and let each group present its conclusions as regards the messages the painting conveys.

(You will find our answers a few pages down, when we return to the painting, but avoid looking at them right now!)

The strategy of 'divide and rule'

While maintaining an appearance of traders, the Company's agents cultivated political relationships with local rulers, offering military support to some against their rivals, thus inserting themselves into Indian political conflicts and emerging as power brokers rather than foreign invaders. They would also

© NCERT not to be republished

Reprint 2026-27

play on rivalries between regional rulers or succession disputes within ruling houses, so as to benefit from these conflicts — the 'divide and rule' policy. The British were equally skilled at exploiting existing divisions within Indian society: they identified and often encouraged tensions between religious communities, for instance.



Fig. 4.7. Clive leading the East India Company's troops at Plassey, 1757 (painting by William Heath, 1821)

The Battle of Plassey (1757) exemplifies this approach. When tensions arose between Siraj-ud-daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, and the East India Company officials led by Robert Clive, the latter identified disgruntled elements within the Nawab's court. Clive hatched a conspiracy with Mir Jafar, the Nawab's military commander, promising to install him as the new Nawab in exchange for his betrayal. The battle took place at Palashi (Plassey as the British spelt it), some 150 kilometres north of present-day Kolkata. Some French forces assisted the Nawab, but Mir Jafar's forces — constituting the majority of the Nawab's army — stood aside, ensuring a British victory despite their smaller number. Even today, 'Mir Jafar' in India remains a synonym for 'traitor'!

By positioning themselves as a kingmaker, the East India Company gradually established control over increasingly large territories. In the 19th century, it went a step further and introduced the infamous **Doctrine of Lapse**, according to which any princely state would be annexed if its ruler died

© NCERT not to be republished

without a natural male heir. This deliberately disregarded the Hindu tradition of adoption, which was a legitimate means of succession in Indian royal houses.



DON'T MISS OUT

In the Indian context, a princely state was a region that remained under the rule of an Indian prince, maharaja or nawab, but which had accepted British protection and guidance in exchange for maintaining internal autonomy. There were hundreds of them, from large ones (such as Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore or Jammu & Kashmir) to smaller ones. At the time of India's Independence, there were over 500 princely states, covering about 40 per cent of the Subcontinent.

The Doctrine of Lapse led to the annexation of numerous states, contributing to the expansion of the territorial control of the British. This created much resentment in sections of Indian society and contributed to the 1857 Rebellion (to which we return below).

Another stratagem (known as '**subsidiary alliance**') was to install a British 'Resident' in the courts of Indian rulers to protect them against internal or external threats; in exchange, they would have to maintain British troops at their own expense and conduct foreign relations only through the British. While appearing to preserve the sovereignty of princely states, the system effectively transferred real power to the British while burdening Indian rulers with the costs of their own subjugation!

The ruler of Hyderabad was among the first to enter such an alliance in 1798; several others soon followed. These so-called alliances allowed the British to control vast territories without the administrative costs of direct rule, creating what was called 'an empire on the cheap'. Once a state entered the system, exiting it was virtually impossible, as any attempt to break free would face overwhelming British military response.

© NCERT not to be republished

From Paradise to Hell?

Devastating famines

A few years after its victory at Plassey, the East India Company secured the right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha — some of India's richest regions. Clive described Bengal in particular as 'the **paradise** of the earth'. The Company's agents extracted maximum revenue while investing minimally in governance or development, with devastating consequences for the population.

Paradise: In a religious context, heaven. Here, an ideal, wealthy or perfectly happy place.

In 1770–1772, coming on top of two years of crop failure, the harsh revenue collection targets imposed by the East India Company in Bengal — requiring farmers to pay a high rate of cash taxes on the produce of their lands, regardless of harvest conditions — caused a catastrophic famine which killed nearly one-third of its population or an estimated 10 million people. In fact, the Company maintained harsh revenue collection targets, even increasing the land tax during the famine. Such cruelty was denounced later not only by Indian personalities but by some British officials and public intellectuals (such as William Digby whom we quoted at the start of this chapter). For instance, a century later, W.W. Hunter, an official, wrote:

> "While the country every year became a total waste, the English government constantly demanded an increased land-tax. ... All through the stifling summer of 1770 the people went on dying. The husbandmen [farmers] sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found; they ate the leaves of trees and the grass of the field. ... Day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities."

Such tragic famines were going to recur throughout the British rule in India. During the Great Famine of 1876–1878, for instance, up to 8 million Indians perished, mostly in the Deccan plateau.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 4.8. Grain bags on Madras beach, ready for export, while people were dying of hunger in large numbers.

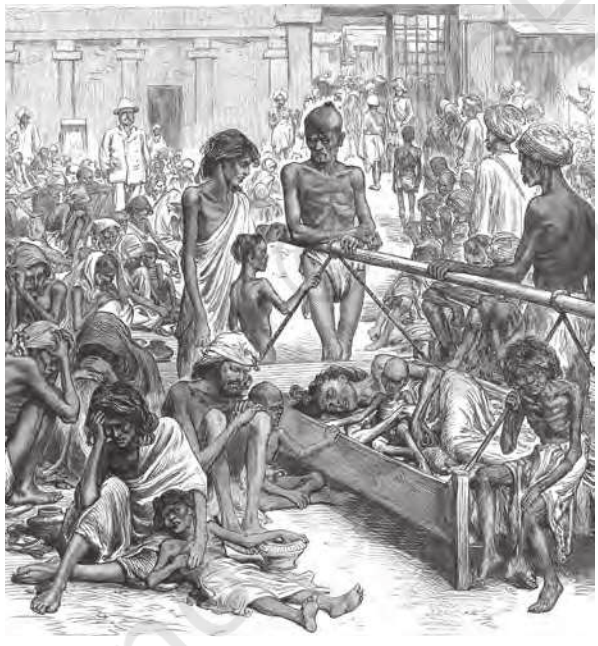


Fig. 4.9. People waiting for famine relief in Bangalore (today Bengaluru) during the 1877 famine (Illustrated London News)

Disregarding the severity of the crisis, some Indian traders would hold on to their stocks in the hope of price rise, causing an artificial scarcity, and the British administration continued to export grain to Britain — about one million tonnes of rice alone per year during the three years of the famine (Fig. 4.8).

Apart from the factors mentioned above, the British economic policy of 'free market', which left prices of commodities free to fluctuate, contributed to the severity of the famines. Thus Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India during the 1876–1878 famine, issued an order that "there is to be no interference of any kind on the part of the Government with the object of reducing the price of food." At the same time, in 1876, at

Reprint 2026-27

the height of the Great Famine, Lytton organised an extravagant durbar in Delhi which involved 'a week-long feast for 68,000 officials, satraps and maharajas'.

Precise numbers of severe famines during the entire British rule vary from a dozen to over 20. According to several Famine Commissions and other reports, it has been estimated that the total number of human victims ('human' since millions of cattle and other animals also died) is anywhere between 50 and 100 million — nearly the number of deaths caused by World War II.

The British administration did open famine relief camps in some cities (Fig. 4.9), but far too few and with inadequate supplies. Some officials argued that famine relief should be deliberately kept very low; the Famine Commission of 1878–80, for example, stated: "The doctrine that in time of famine the poor are entitled to demand relief ... would probably lead to the doctrine that they are entitled to such relief at all times."

We should note that famines in India had occurred throughout history, caused by droughts, floods, military campaigns and other factors, but never on such a scale. During the colonial era, India, especially rural India, sank into deep poverty and never recovered.

The drain of India's wealth

As we saw earlier, economic exploitation of India formed the foundation of British colonial policy. In 1895, the U.S. historian and political scientist Brooks Adams noted:

> "Very soon after [the Battle of] Plassey, the Bengal plunder began to arrive in London, and the effect appears to have been instantaneous, for all authorities agree that the 'industrial revolution' ... began with the year 1760. ... Possibly since the world began no investment has ever yielded the profit reaped from the Indian plunder."

In other words, according to Adams, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which required much investment, was made possible at least partly by the 'stolen wealth from India' (this phrase is by the U.S. historian Will Durant).

© NCERT not to be republished

Taking his cue from scholars such as Adams and Digby, Dadabhai Naoroji, a respected political figure, authored in 1901 *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, in which he compiled from British reports the wealth estimated to have been drained out of India. About the same time, Romesh Chunder Dutt, a historian, did a similar exercise in his *Economic History of India*. All these studies showed that the colonisers had extracted many billions of pounds from India. A more recent estimate (by Utsa Patnaik) for the period 1765 to 1938 comes to 45 trillion U.S. dollars (in today's value), or about 13 times Britain's GDP in 2023! This was extracted not just through taxes, but by charging Indians for the colonial power's expenditures on building the railways, the telegraph network, and even on wars!

Had this wealth remained invested in India, it would have been a very different country when it attained Independence.

House of Commons is the name for the elected lower house of the bicameral parliament of the United Kingdom. Dadabhai Naoroji was the first Indian to be elected to the British House of Commons.



LET'S EXPLORE

Why do you think Dadabhai Naoroji means by 'un-British rule in India'? (*Hint: he was an MP in the* **House of Commons** *in 1892.*)

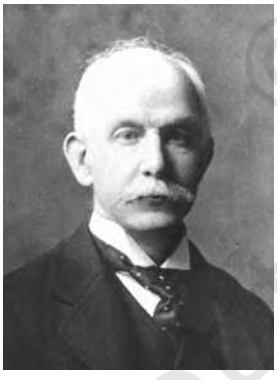


Fig. 4.10. Brooks Adams



Fig. 4.11. William Digby



Fig. 4.12. Dadabhai Naoroji



Fig. 4.13. R.C. Dutt



THINK ABOUT IT

Let us return to this painting (Fig. 4.14), but now with some clues to its symbolism. Note how Britannia (a symbolic

© NCERT not to be republished

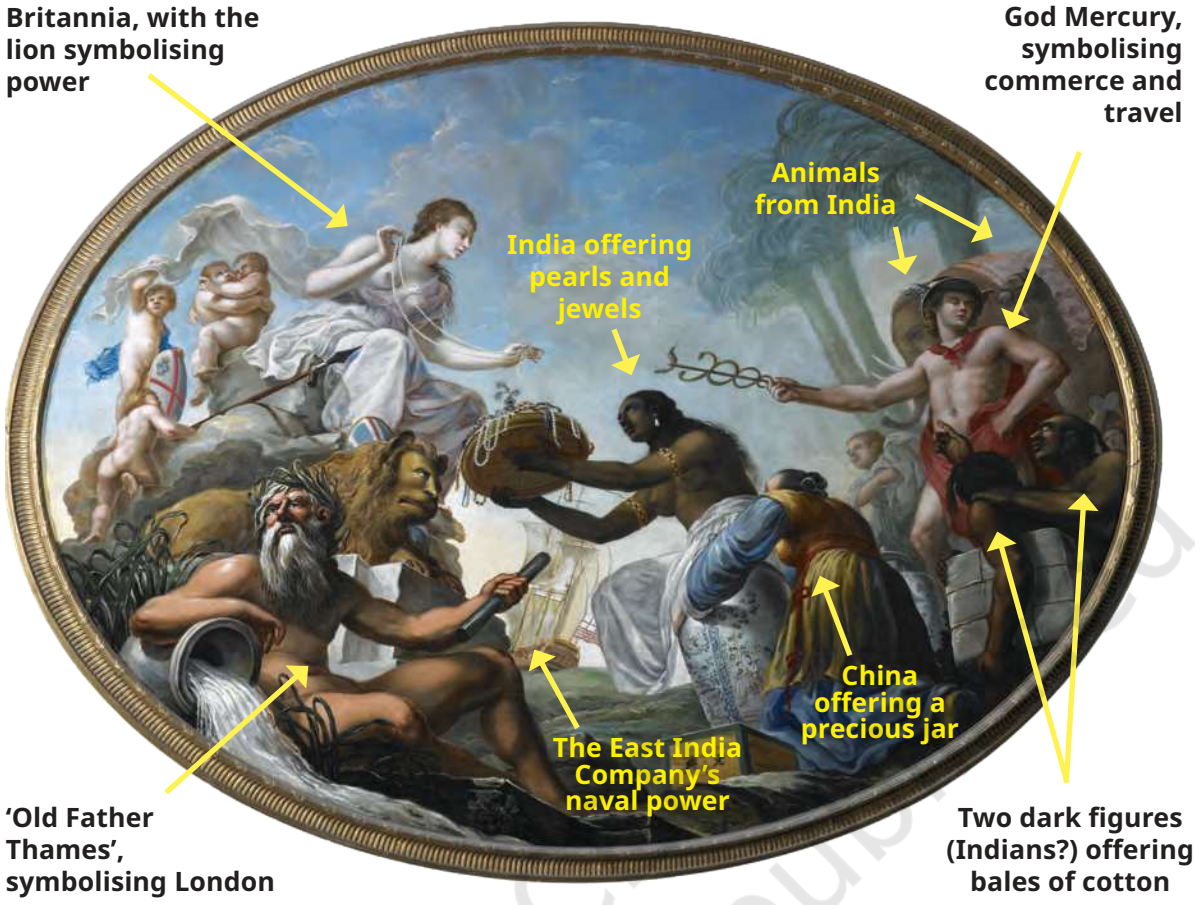


Fig. 4.14. 'The East offering its riches to Britannia' — making sense of the painting's symbolism

figure for Britain) sits higher than the colonies, pointing to her superior power; contrast with the lower position and bent posture of the colonies. Did they really 'offer' their wealth? Or did Britain seize it by force or ruse? Note also the Indians' dark complexion (in contrast with that of Britannia), reflecting the belief in the superiority of white people over the dark-skinned 'natives'.

Changing Landscapes

The expanding colonial rule impacted nearly every aspect of Indian life, as the rulers were convinced that India should be reshaped according to their 'superior' conceptions. Let us briefly look at a few of those impacts.

Reprint 2026-27

Decline of India's indigenous industries

Embossed: With a design stamped on the cloth in such a way that it stands out in relief.

Before the 18th century, India was renowned for its manufacturing capabilities, particularly in textiles — cotton, silk, wool, jute, hemp and coir being the chief ones. Indian cotton textiles, in particular, with rich and intricate designs, bright colours, and textures ranging from ultra-thin muslins to richly **embossed** fabrics were in high demand in many parts of the world.

LET'S EXPLORE



Do you understand all the terms used above to list and describe Indian textiles? If not, form groups of four or five and try to find out more, then compare your findings with the help of your teacher.

British policy imposed heavy duties on Indian textiles imported into Britain while forcing India to accept British manufactured goods with minimal tariffs. Moreover, Britain now controlled most of the sea trade as well as exchange rates, so Indian traders found it difficult to export as earlier. The result was the ruin of Indian textile industry. In the 19th century, India's textile exports fell sharply, while Britain's imports into India grew even more sharply. Communities of skilled artisans who had practised their craft for generations were reduced to poverty and forced to return to subsistence agriculture on increasingly overtaxed land. As William Bentinck, then Governor-General of India, observed in 1834, "The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

Similar scenarios unfolded for India's manufactures of iron, steel, paper and other goods. India's share of the world GDP kept declining throughout the colonial rule, reaching hardly 5 per cent at the time of Independence. In less than two centuries, one of the richest lands of the world had become one of the poorest.

Dismantling traditional governance structures

Before British colonisation, India possessed well-organised systems of local self-governance. Village councils managed

© NCERT not to be republished

community affairs, resolved disputes, and organised public works such as irrigation, roads, etc. Regional kingdoms maintained complex administrative structures that had evolved over centuries to address local needs and conditions. Charles Metcalfe, an acting Governor-General in the 1830s, described the system and its efficiency in this important statement:

> "The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; but the village community remains the same. ... This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India."

The British systematically dismantled these indigenous governance systems, replacing them with a centralised bureaucracy designed primarily to facilitate tax collection and maintain order, rather than promote public welfare. This transformation destroyed centuries-old mechanisms of community decision-making.

The introduction of British codes of law disregarded customary laws and practices that had governed Indian communities for generations. While presented as modernisation, this imposition of a foreign system unsuited to India alienated ordinary Indians from the judicial system, creating courts that were expensive, time-consuming, and conducted in a foreign language.

Transforming Indian education: creating 'brown Englishmen'

Education became a powerful tool for the creation of a class of Indians who would serve British interests. In earlier centuries, India had diverse educational traditions — *pāṭhaśhālās, madrasās, vihāras*, and many forms of apprenticeship learning. These institutions transmitted not only practical knowledge but also cultural values and traditions. Even in the early 19th century,

© NCERT not to be republished

British reports reported hundreds of thousands of village schools across India (for instance, 100,000 to 150,000 of them in Bengal and Bihar up to 1830!) "where young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical, … and at the same time so simple and effectual…"

Orientalist: A largely obsolete term to designate a scholar of the 'Orient', that is, regions from West Asia to the Far East. In India, Orientalists (now called 'Indologists') were often scholars of Sanskrit, Pali, Persian and other languages.

A sharp turning point in India's educational history was marked by the notorious 1835 '**Minute on Indian Education**' of British historian and politician, Thomas B. Macaulay. In it, although he admitted that he had "no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic," he expressed his conviction that European knowledge was vastly superior to India's: "I have never found one among them [**Orientalists**] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Indians, therefore needed British education, whose objective would be to create a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

Although a few prominent British Orientalists argued that Indian students should be left to study in their own languages, Macaulay's policy gained the upper hand and India's traditional schools slowly disappeared, while English became a language of prestige associated with the colonial masters, resulting in lasting divisions in Indian society between English-educated elites and the masses.

The new education system served multiple colonial objectives. It created a pool of Indian clerks and minor officials who could staff the lower ranks of the colonial administration at a fraction of the cost of British personnel. It also sidelined traditional sources of knowledge and authority, creating generations of Indians disconnected from their own cultural heritage.



THINK ABOUT IT

What exactly did Macaulay mean when he wrote that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia"? And why should he want to make Indians "English in taste, in

© NCERT not to be republished

Reprint 2026-27

opinions, in morals, and in intellect"? How does this relate to the 'civilising mission' mentioned at the start of the chapter? Ask your teacher to guide a class debate on these questions.

Reshaping economic structures to serve imperial needs

The British transformed India's economy from a self-sufficient agricultural system supplemented by craft and manufacture production into a supplier of raw materials for British industry and a market forced to buy British goods. Without going into the technical details of this economic transformation, let us take the example of the construction of India's vast railway network, often cited as a colonial blessing. While the railways did bring people closer together and integrated India's internal market, it was designed primarily to move raw materials from the interior to ports for export and to distribute British manufactured goods throughout India. Railway routes largely ignored existing trade



Fig. 4.15. A steam locomotive of the Madras Railway (one of the companies operating the rail network in British India) in 1860

© NCERT not to be republished

patterns to serve colonial economic interests. Another purpose was to move armies quickly from their cantonments if they had to fight a distant rebellion or war.

Besides, the construction of India's railways was not a gift from the colonial rulers to India. Most of it was paid for by Indian tax revenue, which means that Indian funded infrastructure that primarily served British strategic and commercial interests, instead of being focused on serving the people's needs. The same can be said of the telegraph network.

Even the administrative costs of colonialism were borne by Indian subjects. The colonial administrative apparatus, military installations, and the lavish lifestyles of British officials in India were all financed by Indian taxation. In short, Indians funded their own subjugation.

Early Resistance Movements: Challenging Colonial Authority

India was such an enormous source of wealth, natural and human resources for the British that they nicknamed her 'the jewel in the crown of the British Empire'. And they asserted that India would forever remain part of the British Empire, "on which the sun never sets."



THINK ABOUT IT

What is meant by "the sun never sets on the British Empire"? Do you think this was a correct statement?

However, almost from the beginning of the British conquest of India, resistance movements manifested to try and repel this self-imposed 'guest'. We will briefly survey a few such movements, but before we do so, let us have a good look at the map of the British Indian Empire (Fig. 4.16). The red and pink territories are those directly under British administration, while the yellow ones are the princely states we discussed earlier. (The black lines stand for the railway lines.)

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 4.16. A map of the British Indian Empire in 1909

LET'S EXPLORE

Examine the map. What are the main differences with the map of today's India, in terms both of borders and of names?



The 'Sannyasi-Fakir rebellion'

One of the earliest organised resistance movements, often called the 'the Sannyasi (or Sannyasi-Fakir) Rebellion', began in Bengal after the terrible famine of 1770. Groups of sannyasis (Hindu ascetics) and fakirs (Muslim ascetics), who

© NCERT not to be republished

traditionally travelled freely for pilgrimage and charity, found their movements restricted by the British East India Company policies, especially by the new land and taxation policies. The precise motivations of the sannyasis and fakirs have been debated, but over the next three decades they attacked British treasuries and tax collectors. The British called them 'bandits', executed some of them and used their superior forces to eventually defeat them. This rebellion later inspired the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882); it contained the song 'Vande Mātaram', which would inspire Indians during the struggle for freedom in the early 20th century and, after Independence, became India's national song.

Tribal uprisings

India's tribal communities faced unique threats as the British expanded into forests and hills, disrupting their traditional way of life. The British described tribals as 'primitive', restricted their access to forests and forest produce, sometimes acquiring tribal land or turning it into private property, imposing cash taxes, catching tribals in debt traps, replacing traditional tribal councils with the British legal system and encouraging missionaries to 'civilise' and convert tribals to Christianity. Besides, a colonial law categorised hundreds of tribal communities as 'criminal tribes', causing them to be unjustly harassed for decades.

Some of the above abuse led some tribes to rise in rebellion against the colonial power. Among the first such events, the **Kol Uprising** (1831–1832) in Chota Nagpur (in present-day Jharkhand) started when the British introduced land policies that favoured outsiders over the original tribal inhabitants. The Kol tribes (which included the Mundas and Oraons, among others) temporarily established their control over significant territory before being defeated by the British forces. The **Santhal Rebellion** of 1855–1856, a widespread uprising of the Santhal people across parts of present-day Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal, was led by two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, and rebelled against moneylenders and landlords who were taking away their ancestral lands with British support. The Santhals

© NCERT not to be republished

declared their own government and vowed to 'fight to the last drop of blood'. The British response was brutal; after some initial losses, they burned entire villages and killed thousands of Santhals, including, eventually, the rebel leaders. However, the daring Santhal rebellion inspired other tribal communities to resist colonial rule.

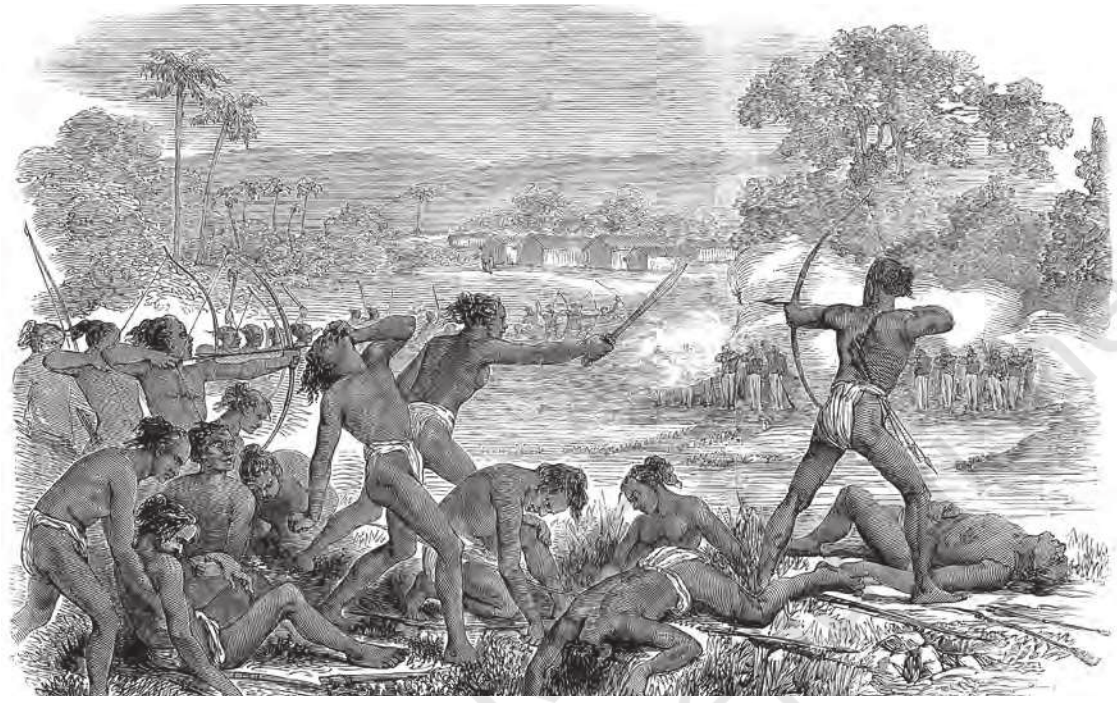


Fig. 4.17. An 1856 sketch in the Illustrated London News depicting an unequal confrontation between Santhal rebels and gun-wielding sepoys

LET'S EXPLORE



Note how the Santhals are depicted in the 1856 sketch (Fig. 4.17) drawn from an artist's imagination: observe their complexion, dress, weapons and draw your conclusions as regards the image this depiction would create in the popular mind in Britain.

Peasant uprisings against economic exploitation

Even without famines, peasants suffered under the unfair British revenue collections, often losing their lands to moneylenders or new landlords. The **Indigo Revolt** (1859–1862)

© NCERT not to be republished

illustrates this exploitation. European planters forced peasants in the northern parts of Bengal to abandon food crops and, instead, grow indigo plants, as the indigo dye was then in great demand in Europe. From planters to traders, everyone earned huge profits — except the peasants, who were so poorly paid that they got trapped in debt slavery. When they refused to grow indigo, they faced imprisonment, torture, and destruction of their property. Their uprising was directed mostly at the planters, who retaliated by hiring mercenaries to attack the peasants. Their cause was supported by educated Bengalis and the Bengali press; the British authorities were eventually forced to restrict some of the worst abuses.



LET'S EXPLORE

Indigo is a natural deep blue pigment used in dyeing. Can you think of other natural substances that have been traditionally used in India to dye cloth?

There are several more notable examples of uprisings across the Subcontinent, which, along with the other aspects of the British rule that we saw earlier, built up to the largest uprising of the 19th century. Let us turn to it.

Mutiny: In this context, mutiny refers to a rebellion by soldiers, or sailors in the case of a navy, against their officers.

The Great Rebellion of 1857

The British called it the 'Sepoy Mutiny'. 'Sepoys', let us recall, were the Indian soldiers enrolled in the East India company's British Army; its officers, of course, were almost all British. After India's Independence, historians rejected the term 'Sepoy **Mutiny**', proposing a few others instead; following many scholars, we will call the event the 'Great Rebellion of 1857'. But what exactly happened?



LET'S EXPLORE

Why do you think was the term 'Sepoy Mutiny' rejected after Indian Independence? Write one paragraph explaining your reasons.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 4.18. Imaginary depiction of the sepoys' rebellion at Meerut (Illustrated London News, 1857)

Even earlier, there were several signs of severe discontent among the sepoys, beginning with the so-called 'Vellore Mutiny' of 1806, which erupted when the British introduced new uniform regulations that violated the religious practices of both Hindu and Muslim sepoys. For example, they were forbidden from wearing religious marks on their foreheads and were required to shave their beards. The sepoys seized the Vellore fort (in present-day Tamil Nadu) and killed many British officers and troops; the British however crushed the revolt, killing or executing hundreds of sepoys.

We should also keep in mind that most sepoys were from agricultural families, which had been suffering great hardship owing to the British policies on land revenue. After decades of increasing frustration, in 1857 rumours spread across northern and central India that rifle cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat, offending the Hindu and Muslim sepoys' religious sensibilities. At Barrackpore (in present-day West Bengal), the sepoy Mangal Pandey attacked British officers. His execution spread further discontent among the sepoys. In Meerut (in

© NCERT not to be republished

present-day Uttar Pradesh), some of them killed their British officers and marched to nearby Delhi, where they proclaimed the elderly but politically powerless Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as their leader (his 'empire' was limited to a small area in Delhi). The military decisions were, however, taken by the commanders. The revolt quickly spread across northern and central India, with sepoys capturing key cities like Kanpur, Lucknow and Jhansi. At Kanpur, rebel forces under Nana Saheb initially agreed to give safe passage to British civilians, but then massacred over 200 men, women and children for reasons that are still debated.

The British response was systematic and extremely brutal, beginning with the recapture of Delhi in September 1857, where the British forces conducted house-to-house massacres. At Kanpur, they conducted mass executions designed to strike terror in the population. In a long punitive campaign they burned villages and destroyed crops, causing countless deaths — vastly more than those inflicted by the rebels.

According to some historians, the Great Rebellion failed because the sepoys lacked a unified command and a consistent strategy, despite some heroic leaders.

The uprising failed, but it marked a turning point, especially in sowing a seed for the idea that foreign domination was unacceptable. The seed would grow early in the 20th century into a full-fledged struggle for freedom, though with different methods. Meantime, in 1858, the British Crown took direct control of India from the East India Company, initiating the period of the British Raj. British policies shifted from aggressive territorial expansion to consolidation of control. The Indian Army was reorganised so as to prevent unified resistance in the future.

The Legacy of European Colonialism in India

The European (mostly British) conquest and rule of India was not a 'civilising mission' — India's own civilisation was much older than Europe's. It was a process of subjugation and

© NCERT not to be republished

Two heroines

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi fought bravely to save her kingdom from British annexation; assisted by the Maratha Tatia (or Tantia) Tope, Nana Saheb's military adviser, Rani Lakshmibai managed to escape a besieged Jhansi and to conquer the Gwalior fort, seizing the treasury and the arsenal. She was killed on 18 June 1858 on the battlefield. The British army officer who commanded the attack on Jhansi noted that the Rani was "remarkable for her beauty, cleverness, perseverance [and] generosity to her subordinates. These qualities, combined with her rank, rendered her most dangerous of all the rebel leaders. ... [She was the] best and bravest of the rebels." Tatia Tope continued fighting until early 1859 but was betrayed and handed over to the British, who hanged him.



Fig. 4.19. A miniature portrait of Rani Lakshmibai (1853 or earlier)



Fig. 4.20. Detail of a portrait of Begum Hazrat Mahal in the 1850s

Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh (north-central portion of Uttar Pradesh) also resisted the British-led resistance after her kingdom was annexed and joined the rebels during the 1857 uprising, leading the defence of Lucknow when the British attempted to recapture the city. She rejected British offers of safe passage if she surrendered and ultimately had to take refuge in nearby Nepal. In November 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation marking the end of the East India Company's rule in India; she promised non-interference in religious matters and greater inclusion of Indians in the administration. Begum Hazrat Mahal issued a counter-proclamation, warning Indians not to trust such assurances, as "it is the unvarying custom of the English never to forgive a fault be it great or small."

© NCERT not to be republished

exploitation executed systematically, with brutal repression if necessary. Except for a small Indian elite who accepted British rule as inevitable, the Indians suffered the fate of many of the world's colonised populations: abuse, exploitation, violence and uprooting.

At the same time, the colonial rule had some largely unintended consequences. It opened (or re-opened) India to the world and the world to India. The British (and the French to a much smaller extent) were systematic in documenting every aspect of their conquest, from its geography (they conducted meticulous surveys of the Subcontinent). They created impressive lists of all ethnic groups, although the lists were flawed because of the unscientific but prevalent notions of 'race' (as genetics has shown, 'races' do not exist). They also documented India's monuments, studying their art and architecture, restoring some of the ruined ones, and initiating the discipline of archaeology. But in the process, they (and other colonial powers) stole thousands of statues, paintings, jewels, manuscripts and other cultural artefacts from India and sent them to European museums or private collections. While this represented a profound cultural loss and violation of India's heritage, it also promoted some appreciation of Indian art in the European public. Such massive theft took place over much of the colonised world; today, there are ongoing debates and efforts to repatriate some of these cultural treasures to their countries of origin.



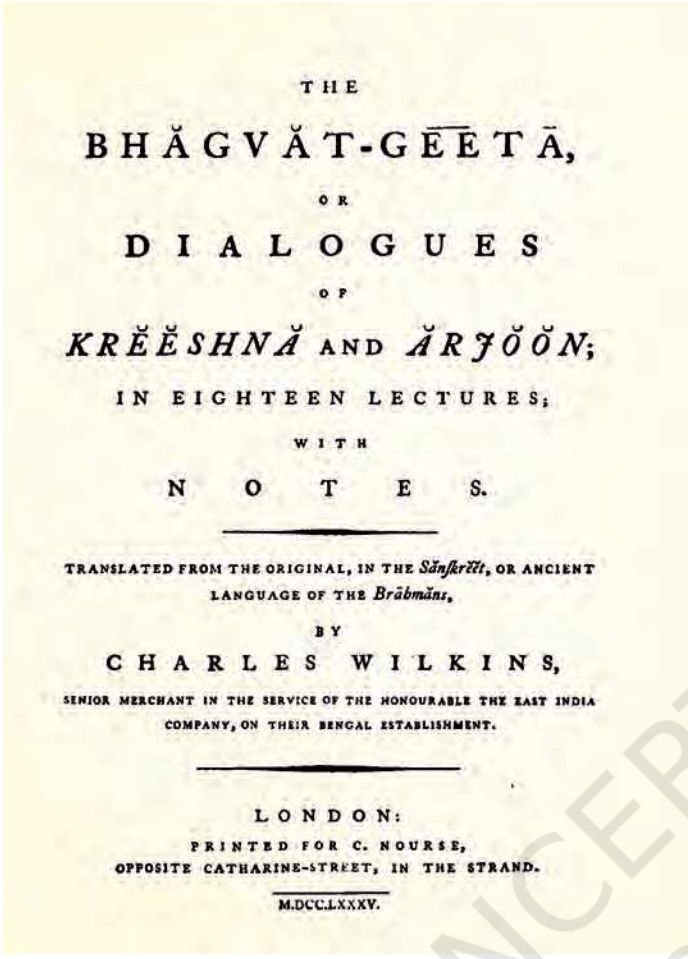
LET'S EXPLORE

→ In the sentence "It opened (or re-opened) India to the world and the world to India", why do you think we added 're-opened'?

→ Some argue that stolen cultural heritage has been better preserved abroad than it would have been in India. What is your view on its repatriation? Discuss in groups.

Finally, although British scholars were not the first Europeans to master the Sanskrit language, they started publishing some of the

© NCERT not to be republished



THE

BHĂGVĂT-GĒĒTĀ,

OR

DIALOGUES

OF

KRĔĔSHNĂ AND *ĂRJŎŎN*;

IN EIGHTEEN LECTURES;

WITH

NOTES.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL, IN THE *Sānskrĕt*, OR ANCIENT LANGUAGE OF THE *Brāhmăns*,

BY

CHARLES WILKINS,

SENIOR MERCHANT IN THE SERVICE OF THE HONOURABLE THE EAST INDIA COMPANY, ON THEIR BENGAL ESTABLISHMENT.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR C. NOURSE,

OPPOSITE CATHARINE-STREET, IN THE STRAND.

M.DCC.LXXXV.

Fig. 4.21. The title page of the first English translation (in 1785) of a Sanskrit text: 'The Bhagavad Gītā or Dialogues of Kṛiṣhṇa and Arjuna' (using modern spelling). The translator was Charles Wilkins.

first translations of Sanskrit texts into a European language; the French, the Germans and others soon followed. The motivations were mixed: some scholars were genuine students or admirers of India's ancient culture, while others were convinced that by studying Indian languages and texts, it would be easier to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity.



The spread of Sanskrit studies and texts in Europe (followed later by other Indian languages) was like the 'discovery of a new continent', in the words of the German philosopher Georg Hegel. Indian texts had a great impact on European philosophers, writers, poets, artists, and sometimes statesmen; this influence extended to the United States of America in the 19th century. This is a reminder that although political domination may flow in one direction, cultural influence sometimes flows in the opposite direction.

© NCERT not to be republished

Before we move on ...

- The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British were attracted to India primarily because of her great wealth. They fought among themselves for dominance of the Subcontinent, with the British gaining the upper hand.
- The British ruthless taxation policy inflicted great misery on the people, causing severe famines in particular and millions of deaths. The deliberate deindustrialization of India devastated her once-thriving manufacturing sector.
- Gradually, the British imposed their administrative structures, legal systems and educational institutions to ensure total colonial control over the Indian society.
- The Portuguese focused on religious conversion and cultural transformation in Goa created long-lasting social divisions. The French policy of assimilation created a small elite of culturally French Indians in Pondicherry.
- Several uprisings took place from the late 18th century onward, with the Great Rebellion of 1857 threatening the colonial rule for a while. Most of these uprisings were brutally repressed.
- In the 19th century, India's classical culture (in particular through translated Sanskrit texts) flowed back to the West, creating a lasting influence.

Questions and activities

1. What is colonialism? Give three different definitions based on the chapter or on your knowledge.
2. Colonial rulers often claimed that their mission was to 'civilise' the people they ruled. Based on the evidence in this chapter, do you think this was true in the case of India? Why or why not?
3. How was the British approach to colonising India different from earlier European powers like the Portuguese or the French?

© NCERT not to be republished

Reprint 2026-27

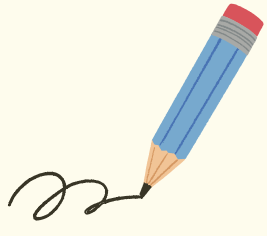
4. “Indians funded their own subjugation.” What does this mean in the context of British infrastructure projects in India like the railway and telegraph networks?
5. What does the phrase ‘divide and rule’ mean? Give examples of how this was used by the British in India?
6. Choose one area of Indian life, such as agriculture, education, trade, or village life. How was it affected by colonial rule? Can you find any signs of those changes still with us today? Express your ideas through a short essay, a poem, a drawing, or a painting.
7. Imagine you are a reporter in 1857. Write a brief news report on Rani Lakshmibai’s resistance at Jhansi. Include a timeline or storyboard showing how the rebellion began, spread, and ended, highlighting key events and leaders.
8. Imagine an alternate history where India was never colonised by European powers. Write a short story of about 300 words exploring how India might have developed on its own path.
9. Role-play: Enact a historical discussion between a British official and an Indian personality like Dadabhai Naoroji on the British colonial rule in India.
10. Explore a local resistance movement (tribal, peasant, or princely) from your state or region during the colonial period. Prepare a report or poster describing:
    - What was the specific trigger, if any?
    - Who led the movement?
    - What were their demands?
    - How did the British respond?
    - How is this event remembered today (e.g., local festivals, songs, monuments)?

© NCERT not to be republished

Noodles

© NCERT not to be republished

*‘Noodles’ is our abbreviation for ‘Notes and Doodles’!



Reprint 2026-27