

## The Coming of the Europeans

The quest for wealth and power brought Europeans to Indian shores in 1498 when Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese voyager, arrived in Calicut (modern Kozhikode, Kerala) on the west coast. In their search for spices and Christian converts, the Portuguese challenged Arab supremacy in the Indian Ocean, and, with their galleons fitted with powerful cannons, set up a network of strategic trading posts along the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. In 1510 the Portuguese took over the enclave of Goa, which became the center of their commercial and political power in India and which they controlled for nearly four and a half centuries.

Economic competition among the European nations led to the founding of commercial companies in England (the East India Company, founded in 1600) and in the Netherlands (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie--the United East India Company, founded in 1602), whose primary aim was to capture the spice trade by breaking the Portuguese monopoly in Asia. Although the Dutch, with a large supply of capital and support from their government, preempted and ultimately excluded the British from the heartland of spices in the East Indies (modern-day Indonesia), both companies managed to establish trading "factories" (actually warehouses) along the Indian coast. The Dutch, for example, used various ports on the Coromandel Coast in South India, especially Pulicat (about twenty kilometers north of Madras), as major sources for slaves for their plantations in the East Indies and for cotton cloth as early as 1609. (The English, however, established their first factory at what today is known as Madras only in 1639.) Indian rulers enthusiastically accommodated the newcomers in hopes of pitting them against the Portuguese. In 1619 Jahangir granted them permission to trade in his territories at Surat (in Gujarat) on the west coast and Hughli (in West Bengal) in the east. These and other locations on the peninsula became centers of international trade in spices, cotton, sugar, raw silk, saltpeter, calico, and indigo.

English company agents became familiar with Indian customs and languages, including Persian, the unifying official language under the Mughals. In many ways, the English agents of that period lived like Indians, intermarried willingly, and a large number of them never returned to their home country. The knowledge of India thus acquired and the mutual ties forged with Indian trading groups gave the English a competitive edge over other Europeans. The French commercial interest--Compagnie des Indes Orientales (East India Company, founded in 1664)--came late, but the French also established themselves in India, emulating the precedents set by their competitors as they founded their enclave at Pondicherry (Puduchcheri) on the Coromandel Coast.

In 1717 the Mughal emperor, Farrukh-siyar (r. 1713-19), gave the British--who by then had already established themselves in the south and the west--a grant of thirty-eight villages near Calcutta, acknowledging their importance to the continuity of international trade in the Bengal economy. As did the Dutch and the French, the British brought silver bullion and copper to pay for transactions, helping the smooth functioning of the Mughal revenue system and increasing the benefits to local artisans and traders. The fortified warehouses of the British brought extraterritorial status, which enabled them to administer

their own civil and criminal laws and offered numerous employment opportunities as well as asylum to foreigners and Indians. The British factories successfully competed with their rivals as their size and population grew. The original clusters of fishing villages (Madras and Calcutta) or series of islands (Bombay) became headquarters of the British administrative zones, or presidencies as they generally came to be known. The factories and their immediate environs, known as the White-town, represented the actual and symbolic preeminence of the British--in terms of their political power--as well as their cultural values and social practices; meanwhile, their Indian collaborators lived in the Black-town, separated from the factories by several kilometers.

The British company employed sepoy--European-trained and European-led Indian soldiers--to protect its trade, but local rulers sought their services to settle scores in regional power struggles. South India witnessed the first open confrontation between the British and the French, whose forces were led by Robert Clive and François Dupleix, respectively. Both companies desired to place their own candidate as the nawab, or ruler, of Arcot, the area around Madras. At the end of a protracted struggle between 1744 and 1763, when the Peace of Paris was signed, the British gained an upper hand over the French and installed their man in power, supporting him further with arms and lending large sums as well. The French and the British also backed different factions in the succession struggle for Mughal viceroyalty in Bengal, but Clive intervened successfully and defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-daula in the Battle of Plassey (Palashi, about 150 kilometers north of Calcutta) in 1757. Clive found help from a combination of vested interests that opposed the existing nawab: disgruntled soldiers, landholders, and influential merchants whose commercial profits were closely linked to British fortunes.

Later, Clive defeated the Mughal forces at Buxar (Baksar, west of Patna in Bihar) in 1765, and the Mughal emperor (Shah Alam, r. 1759-1806) conferred on the company administrative rights over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, a region of roughly 25 million people with an annual revenue of 40 million rupees (for current value of the rupee--see Glossary). The imperial grant virtually established the company as a sovereign power, and Clive became the first British governor of Bengal.

Besides the presence of the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French, there were two lesser but noteworthy colonial groups. Danish entrepreneurs established themselves at several ports on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, in the vicinity of Calcutta and inland at Patna between 1695 and 1740. Austrian enterprises were set up in the vicinity of Surat in modern-day southeastern Gujarat. As with the other non-British enterprises, the Danish and Austrian enclaves were taken over by the British between 1765 and 1815.

Source: *U.S. Library of Congress*