

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional British Expansion in India

Paper 2 · Unit 2

Plassey to Punjab, subsidiary alliance and the Doctrine of Lapse:
60 marks in four years across five questions, all of them about
method rather than battles.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

British expansion in India: Bengal, Mysore, Western India, Sindh, Punjab, the Princely States; British paramountcy, Indian resistance.

Bengal: the first conquest

Everything the Company did later was financed from Bengal, so this section explains the method as well as the event. The 2024 paper asked about Plassey through the mercenary who became kingmaker.

- Conflict with **Siraj-ud-Daula** arose from the Company's abuse of the **dastak**, the duty-free trading permit granted in 1717, which its servants used for private trade and sold to Indian merchants.
- Siraj took Calcutta in June 1756, and the episode conventionally called the Black Hole was used thereafter to justify reconquest, though the reported figures are almost certainly inflated.
- **Plassey on 23 June 1757** was decided by conspiracy rather than combat, since **Mir Jafar** held his troops back under an agreement negotiated with Clive through the banker **Jagat Seth** and the merchant Amichand.
- That conspiracy is what the 2024 quotation means: the Company as a hired military force discovered it could choose the Nawab, and the bankers who financed Bengal preferred a solvent client to a hostile one.
- **Mir Qasim**, installed in 1760, proved too independent, abolished internal duties altogether in 1763 to end the Company's unfair advantage, and was removed for it.
- **Buxar on 22 October 1764** was the decisive military engagement, defeating the combined forces of Mir Qasim, Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh and the emperor Shah Alam II, and it settled the question Plassey had only opened.
- **Treaty of Allahabad in 1765** granted the Company the **diwani** of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, giving it the revenue of the richest province in the subcontinent while the Nawab retained nizamat responsibilities.
- **Dual government** from 1765 to 1772, in which the Company held revenue and the Nawab held administration, produced the **Bengal famine of 1770** and was abolished by Warren Hastings, who assumed direct collection.
- Financing matters most for later expansion: Bengal revenue paid for the army that conquered Mysore, the Marathas, Sindh and Punjab, so the whole subsequent story is downstream of 1765.

KEY TERMS

Dastak — The duty-free trade permit of 1717, whose abuse by Company servants for private trade was the immediate cause of conflict in Bengal.

Diwani — The right to collect land revenue, granted to the Company for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765.

Mysore and the south

Four wars over four decades against the most formidable Indian opponent the Company faced. The 2023 paper asked about the elimination of the French, which runs through this story.

- **Carnatic Wars** between 1746 and 1763 were the Anglo-French contest fought through Indian claimants, and **Dupleix** pioneered the practice of renting European-trained troops to Indian rulers.

- French defeat at **Wandiwash in 1760** and the settlement at Paris in 1763 restricted France to unfortified trading posts, which is the elimination the 2023 quotation describes.
- That question invites a qualification worth making: the French were eliminated by their own metropolitan defeat in the Seven Years War and by the loss of naval supremacy as much as by any Indian campaign.
- **Haidar Ali** built Mysore's power from 1761 on a European-trained infantry, artillery and a state monopoly of commerce, and he defeated the Company in the First Anglo-Mysore War, dictating the Treaty of Madras in 1769.
- Second Anglo-Mysore War from 1780 saw Haidar's forces destroy a Company detachment at **Pollilur in 1780**, and the war ended inconclusively at Mangalore in 1784 after his death.
- **Tipu Sultan** modernised further, sending embassies to France, Ottoman Turkey and Persia, experimenting with state trading and sericulture, and deploying iron-cased **rockets** that the British later studied at Woolwich.
- Third Anglo-Mysore War ended at **Seringapatam in 1792** with Tipu ceding half his territory and surrendering two sons as hostages, and the fourth ended with his death in 1799.
- **Subsidiary alliance** with Hyderabad in 1798 was the instrument that isolated Tipu, since the Nizam's French-trained corps was disbanded and replaced by Company troops paid from Hyderabad's revenue.
- Mysore's fall gave the Company the south, and the **poligar rebellions of 1799 to 1805** in the Tamil country, including Kattabomman's, were the residual resistance to that settlement.

The Marathas and western India

Three wars across forty years against the only power with subcontinental reach. The 2024 paper asked about the Treaty of Salbai, which is the pivot.

- First Anglo-Maratha War from 1775 arose from Company support for **Raghunath Rao** against the Barbhai council, and it went badly, with the humiliating Convention of Wadgaon in 1779.
- **Treaty of Salbai in 1782** restored the status quo and secured about twenty years of peace, and the 2024 question asks you to judge that peace as strategically costly to the Marathas.
- The case that it was costly runs: the Company used those two decades to consolidate Bengal revenue, defeat Mysore twice, and build the subsidiary alliance system, while Maratha energy went into internal factionalism after Madhav Rao I's death.
- **Mahadji Scindia** nonetheless rebuilt northern Maratha power in the 1780s with de Boigne's European-officered brigades and held the Mughal emperor as a protected figurehead from 1784.
- **Treaty of Bassein in 1802**, by which Peshwa Baji Rao II accepted subsidiary alliance after defeat by Holkar, split the confederacy and gave the Company a legal pretext to intervene.
- Second Anglo-Maratha War of 1803 to 1805 saw **Assaye and Laswari** won by Arthur Wellesley and Lake, and it reduced Scindia and Bhonsle while Holkar remained unsubdued.
- Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817 to 1818 ended the confederacy, deposed the Peshwa, and created the residual state of Satara, after which the **Pindari** irregulars were destroyed in the same campaign.
- Maratha defeat is usually explained by the confederacy's inability to act jointly, by the Company's superior finance and supply, and by the great houses' willingness to sign separate treaties.

Sindh, Punjab and the northwest

The last conquests, and the ones most openly driven by strategy rather than by any Indian provocation. Both are useful for a question on the ethics of expansion.

- **Sindh** was annexed in 1843 by **Charles Napier** after a manufactured quarrel with the Amirs, and Napier's own diary records that the transaction was a piece of rascality, which is unusually candid testimony.
- Motive was strategic, arising from the **Great Game** anxiety about Russian advance and from the disastrous First Afghan War of 1839 to 1842, which made control of the Indus route seem essential.
- **Ranjit Singh** had built the Sikh kingdom from 1799, held Lahore, Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar, and maintained the **Treaty of Amritsar of 1809** with the Company defining the Sutlej as the boundary.
- His **Fauj-i-Khas** under Ventura, Allard and Court was the most formidable Indian army of the period, and the Company avoided conflict throughout his lifetime, which is itself evidence of his standing.
- Succession disorder after his death in 1839 produced the **First Anglo-Sikh War of 1845 to 1846**, ending in the Treaty of Lahore and the cession of Kashmir, which was then sold to Gulab Singh for seventy five lakh rupees.
- Second Anglo-Sikh War of 1848 to 1849, precipitated by the Multan revolt and decided at **Gujrat**, led **Dalhousie** to annex Punjab outright.
- Punjab was thereafter governed under the **non-regulation system** by the Lawrence brothers, and the resulting corps of Sikh and Punjabi troops became the backbone of the army after 1857.
- **Awadh** was annexed in 1856 on grounds of misgovernment rather than lapse, and because Awadh supplied a large share of the Bengal Army's sepoys, the grievance of its dispossessed taluqdars fed directly into 1857.

The instruments: subsidiary alliance and lapse

Method matters more than chronology in this unit, because the questions are almost always about how expansion worked rather than about who won which battle.

- **Ring fence** under Warren Hastings meant defending the Company's frontiers by supporting buffer states, notably Awadh, and paying for it from the buffer's own revenue.
- **Subsidiary alliance**, systematised by **Wellesley from 1798**, required an Indian ruler to accept Company troops, pay for them in cash or by ceding territory, dismiss European officers of other nations, and conduct no diplomacy without permission.
- Its logic was self-financing conquest, since each ally paid for the army that would subdue the next, and Hyderabad in 1798, Mysore in 1799, Awadh in 1801 and the Peshwa in 1802 were the successive links.
- Its effect on the allied state was corrosive, producing military redundancy, fiscal strain from the subsidy, and administrative decay as rulers lost both external purpose and internal accountability.
- **Doctrine of Lapse**, associated with **Dalhousie between 1848 and 1856**, refused recognition to adopted heirs of dependent states, and it took Satara in 1848, Jhaitpur and Sambalpur in 1849, Jhansi and Nagpur in 1853.
- Lapse was not Dalhousie's invention, since earlier annexations had used similar reasoning, but he applied it systematically and it created the specific grievances of **Rani Lakshmibai and Nana Sahib**, whose pension was stopped.

- **Paramountcy** was the doctrine that emerged after 1858, replacing annexation with permanent supremacy, and Queen Victoria's Proclamation guaranteed adoption rights precisely because Lapse had proved so costly.
- The princely states thereafter became, in Canning's phrase, **breakwaters in the storm**, and about a third of the subcontinent's territory remained under indirect rule until 1947.

Instrument	Period	Mechanism	Why it changed
Ring fence	Hastings, 1770s-80s	Buffer states defended at their own cost	Too passive as ambitions grew
Subsidiary alliance	Wellesley, from 1798	Troops imposed and paid for by the ally	Bankrupted allies, provoked resentment
Doctrine of Lapse	Dalhousie, 1848-56	Adopted heirs refused recognition	Directly fed the 1857 revolt
Paramountcy	After 1858	Permanent supremacy without annexation	Held until 1947

The instruments of expansion. Each replaced the previous one when it proved too expensive or too provocative.

Why the Company won

The explanatory section, and the one that lifts an answer out of narrative. Military superiority is the weakest of the available explanations.

- **Fiscal capacity** was decisive, since the diwani gave the Company a settled land revenue that no Indian rival possessed and that it converted directly into a standing army.
- **Credit** followed revenue, and Indian banking houses from the Jagat Seths onward moved their support to whichever power looked solvent, which after 1765 was consistently the Company.
- **Naval power** allowed men and money to move between Bengal, Madras and Bombay and allowed reinforcement from Britain, and no Indian power possessed a comparable capability.
- **Military technology** does not explain the outcome, since Mysore, the Marathas and the Sikhs all fielded European-trained infantry and artillery, and Tipu's rockets were technically ahead of anything the Company had.
- **Sepoy recruitment** meant the Company fought Indian powers largely with Indian soldiers, paid regularly and on time, and regularity of pay is a recurring advantage in the contemporary accounts.
- **Diplomatic isolation** of each opponent in turn was systematic, and the Company never fought two major Indian powers simultaneously if it could avoid doing so.
- **Indian disunity** is the standard explanation and is true but insufficient, since it describes the condition rather than explaining why the Company alone was able to exploit it.
- **Regulating and Pitt's India Acts**, of 1773 and 1784, matter here because parliamentary supervision gave the Company a stability of purpose across changes of Governor-General that its Indian opponents, dependent on individual rulers, could not match.
- Contingency deserves acknowledgement, because the outcome was not visible to contemporaries: in 1780 the Company faced Mysore and the Marathas at once and came close to serious defeat.

Indian resistance

Named in the syllabus alongside expansion, and the section most often omitted. Resistance was continuous, not occasional.

- Ruler-led resistance produced four Mysore wars, three Maratha wars, two Sikh wars and the Anglo-Nepalese and Anglo-Burmese campaigns, so expansion was contested at every stage.
- **Popular resistance** ran alongside it in the Sanyasi and Fakir risings, the Chuar uprising, the Poligar wars, Velu Thampi's revolt in Travancore and the Paika rebellion of 1817.
- **Kittur Chennamma** resisted the application of lapse to her adopted heir in 1824, three decades before Dalhousie made it a doctrine, and Sangolli Rayanna continued the resistance.
- Diplomatic resistance is underrated, and rulers from Tipu to Ranjit Singh pursued alliances with France, Persia, Afghanistan and the Ottomans in an attempt to balance British power.
- **Tipu's embassies** and his correspondence with revolutionary France, including the Jacobin club at Seringapatam, show a genuinely international strategy that failed on French incapacity rather than on Indian passivity.
- The **1857 revolt** is the culmination of this resistance rather than a departure from it, and its leadership drew directly on the dynasties dispossessed by lapse and annexation.
- **Burma and Nepal** completed the frontier settlement, with the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 after the Anglo-Nepalese war and three Anglo-Burmese wars between 1824 and 1885, and Gurkha recruitment from the first of these became permanent.
- Assessment to state: Indian resistance was persistent, militarily competent and diplomatically imaginative, and it failed for want of coordination and of a revenue base comparable to Bengal's rather than for want of will.

Last-mile revision

- Dastak 1717; Plassey 23 June 1757 with Mir Jafar and Jagat Seth; Buxar 22 October 1764; Allahabad 1765 diwani; dual government to 1772; famine 1770.
- Carnatic wars to 1763, Wandiwash 1760; Haidar Ali from 1761, Madras 1769, Pollilur 1780, Mangalore 1784; Seringapatam 1792 and 1799.
- Maratha: Wadgaon 1779, Salbai 1782, Bassein 1802, Assaye and Laswari 1803, confederacy ended 1818.
- Sindh annexed 1843 by Napier; Amritsar 1809; Anglo-Sikh wars 1845-46 and 1848-49; Punjab annexed 1849; Awadh 1856.
- Instruments: ring fence, subsidiary alliance from 1798, Doctrine of Lapse 1848-56, paramountcy after 1858.
- Lapse took Satara 1848, Jhansi and Nagpur 1853; Nana Sahib's pension stopped.
- Company advantages: Bengal revenue, banker credit, naval power, regularly paid sepoys, sequential diplomacy.

Common errors to avoid

- Explaining Plassey as a battle. It was decided by a conspiracy with Mir Jafar and the Jagat Seths, which is what the 2024 question is about.
- Treating Buxar as less important than Plassey. Buxar defeated three powers together and produced the diwani.
- Saying the Company won through superior weapons. Mysore, the Marathas and the Sikhs all had European-trained artillery and infantry.
- Crediting Dalhousie with inventing the Doctrine of Lapse. He systematised an existing practice; Kittur Chennamma faced it in 1824.
- Forgetting that Awadh was annexed for misgovernment, not lapse, and that its taluqdars' grievance fed 1857.
- Omitting Indian resistance. The syllabus names it and a narrative of conquest alone reads as a colonial account.

Mains Practice

The Carnatic Wars, the Anglo-Mysore Wars and the Anglo-Maratha Wars had virtually eliminated the French from the contest of supremacy in South India. Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

“The Sikh monarchy was Napoleonic in the suddenness of its rise, the brilliancy of its success and the completeness of its overthrow.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

“The seeds of domestic dissensions were thickly and deeply sown in the Maratha system under the Peshwas.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

After the battle of Plassey, the mercenary became the Kingmaker.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

Twenty years of peace secured by the Treaty of Salbai proved very costly to the Marathas in strategic terms. Elucidate.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024