



### Interrogating Sources

## Before the Crown: The East India Company and the Making of British India

### Historical Context

Before the British government officially took control of India in 1858, a private trading company called the East India Company played a powerful role in shaping the future of the Indian subcontinent. Founded in 1600, the East India Company began as a business that sought to trade goods like spices, silk, and cotton with India and other parts of Asia. However, over time, the company grew into much more than just a trading business. It slowly became a political and military force that controlled large parts of India. By using alliances, military power, and political manipulation, the East India Company defeated powerful Indian kingdoms and established its own rule. It collected taxes, created laws, and even had its own army, which was larger than Britain's. The Battle of Plassey in 1757 marked a major turning point when the Company gained control of Bengal, one of India's richest regions. From there, its influence expanded across much of the country. Life under Company rule was often difficult for Indians. While the British made some changes like building railroads and introducing new laws, many of their policies favored British profits over the needs of Indian people. Famines, unfair taxes, and disrespect for Indian culture and religion led to growing resentment. In 1857, Indian soldiers in the Company's army rebelled in what became known as the Indian Rebellion or First War of Independence. Although the rebellion was crushed, it shocked the British government. In response, the British Crown ended the East India Company's rule and took direct control of India, establishing what is now referred to as the British Raj. The East India Company's actions laid the foundation for nearly a century of British rule in India and had lasting effects on Indian society, economy, and politics.

### Connection to Habit

Understanding the role of the East India Company in shaping British rule in India requires students to critically examine both primary and secondary sources. By using the Interrogating Sources habit of mind, students learn to ask important questions: Who created this source? What was their purpose? Whose perspective is missing? For example, British government reports or company records may describe the Company's expansion as a civilizing mission, while Indian letters, newspaper articles, or oral histories may reveal the exploitation and resistance experienced by local people. Comparing these perspectives helps students uncover bias, evaluate reliability, and build a fuller, more accurate understanding of the period. This habit reminds us that history is not neutral; it is told by people with specific goals, worldviews, and power.

## Discussion Questions

- In what ways did the East India Company act like a government, even though it was a private company?
- How did imperialism through the East India Company impact Indian society, economy, and governance?
- What forms of resistance did Indian people use to challenge Company rule, and how were these actions recorded or suppressed in historical records?
- What role did the East India Company's military and alliances with local rulers play in the expansion of British control in India?
- How did the Company's shift from trade to territorial control reflect broader patterns of European imperialism during the 18th and 19th centuries?
- How do British sources seek to justify the East India Company's expansion in India? What language do they use to frame their actions?
- What kinds of evidence might Indian sources provide that challenge British narratives of progress and order?

## Suggested Activity

### Materials Needed:

- Digital access to linked primary sources: Robert Clive's Letter to William Pitt (1759), Treaty of Allahabad (1765), and Clive's Speech to the House of Commons (1772)
- Printed or digital copies of the Historical Context
- Printed guiding questions at each station
- Notebook Paper
- Pencil/Pen

### Step 1: Background [10 mins]

Begin with students reading the Historical Context about the rise of the East India Company.

### Step 2: Source Stations [30–40 mins]

Divide the class into small groups (3–4 students). Each group rotates through three source stations.

Station A: Robert Clive's Letter to William Pitt (1759)

#### Guiding Questions:

- What is Clive concerned about here?
- How does this reveal the shifting goals of the Company?
- What does this suggest about the morality or ambition of empires?

Station B: Treaty of Allahabad (1765)

#### Guiding Questions:

- What does this treaty give the Company power to do?
- How might this change everyday life for people in Bengal?
- How does this treaty show the relationship between Indian rulers and the British?

Station C: Clive's Speech to the House of Commons (1772)

#### Guiding Questions:

- What problems does Clive admit to here?
- What does this say about the way the Company ruled India?
- How do British officials seem to justify or defend their rule?

### Step 3: Group Discussion and Reflection [15–20 mins]

After rotating through the stations, bring students back together to discuss:

- Was the East India Company more interested in trade or control?
- What kinds of evidence support the idea that imperialism was driven by profit?
- How did Company rule affect the people and political systems of India?
- Do the primary sources provide different perspectives or reinforce the same narrative? Give specific examples from the sources to support your argument.

Students can record their thoughts in a T-chart:

- Column 1: Evidence of trade/commerce motivations
- Column 2: Evidence of political/military/imperial control

Exit Ticket: Write a paragraph response using evidence from at least two sources.

Prompt: To what extent was the East India Company a business enterprise versus an imperial power?

# Primary Sources

## **Station A: Robert Clive's Letter to William Pitt (1759)**

Guiding Questions:

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- How does this reveal the shifting goals of the Company?
- What does this suggest about the morality or ambition of empires?

## **Station B: Treaty of Allahabad (1765)**

Guiding Questions:

- What does this treaty give the Company power to do?
- How might this change everyday life for people in Bengal?
- How does this treaty show the relationship between Indian rulers and the British?

## **Station C: Clive's Speech to the House of Commons (1772)**

Guiding Questions:

- What problems does Clive admit to here?
- What does this say about the way the Company ruled India?
- How do British officials seem to justify or defend their rule?