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Historians often say that Britain acquired their vast empire in “a fit of absent-mindedness”. However, it is problematic to claim that the British accidentally stumbled into the acquisition of the Indian subcontinent. India’s attainment was neither done in “a fit of absent-mindedness” nor was it completely calculated from the moment the East India Company was chartered. The British were prepared to keep India, an incredible source of revenue, at all costs, and if that meant colonization then they were more than willing to establish colonial power. That being said, the original intention behind chartering the East India Company was not to colonize India, but after establishing some extent of power, the British knowingly took advantage of some of the weaknesses in Indian society to gain more control. They did this by maintaining a façade that still depicted the Mughal emperors as the power holders; this made the transition to British control (indirect and direct) much easier. This façade was implemented in three main ways: during and after the conquest of Bengal, via the subsidiary alliance system and land-holding arrangements, and by the ultimate creation of a limiting political economy. In these ways, the East India Company Raj established the foundation for the British to imperialize India. The British were able to transfer authority from the Mughal Empire (and its princely rulers) to the East India Company, and eventually to the British Crown.

The conquest of Bengal proved incredibly important to the British because of the wealth and revenue it provided. Before the annexation, the British had been exploiting their free-trade privileges in Bengal (they were entitled to dastak or exemption from customs fees). Illegal private trade and favoritism was rampant. The Mughal nawab, or governor, of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daula attempted to stop this illegal activity by storming and imprisoning the British garrison in Calcutta. In reaction to this imprisonment, the British sent Colonel Robert Clive to take back the precious capital. In the Battle of Plassey of 1757, Clive finally defeated Siraj-ud-daula, captured Bengal, and put in place the seed of British rule: a figure-head. (Metcalf, 2006) The EIC was cautious in making sure that the Mughal Empire was still seemingly revered, so by putting a figure-head in place, they made it appear that the Mughals were still in control. Mir Jafar (the figure-head) was merely the puppet of the EIC and had no real power. The acquisition of Bengal was so important because of the massive wealth that it created (Clive became an excessively rich “nabob”). Bengal was the richest province in India. It gave the East India Company the resources to compete with other regions in India. It also led to the eventual annexation of the same regions (i.e. Bihar, Orissa, and Mysore). They had the muscle power to do this because the East India Company could now bolster a larger standing army to enforce and organize a more proficient governing body. The army was made up of sepoys, or Indian mercenaries, that were sent from different parts of the Raj. The EIC used strategies of “military fiscalism” that were already in place. (Metcalf, 2006) By maintaining the same institutions in Bengal, British occupation seemed less disruptive, but it was none-the-less maintained with that pretense and intention. In addition, the influence they had in Bengal, allowed the EIC to sign a treaty with Mughals giving them diwani rights, or revenue collecting rights. These tax collecting rights are closely related to the subsidiary alliance system and the land-holding arrangements that the British put in place. The land-holding arrangements that were upheld during the Mughal empire included jagirdars, or land revenue grant-holders, and zamindars, or land holders. The conquest of Bengal made the Company the jagirdar of Bengal.

The subsidiary alliance system provided the East India Company with a means of gaining profit and control without having to actually govern. After gaining more control over the Raj they would eventually just restructure the governing system, but the subsidiary alliance system benefitted the British for the time it was implemented. In the system the Company would provide services, such as military protection from warring states, to Indian states and regions. In return, the EIC received tribute, soldiers, and equipment that included guns and other armaments from the regions to which they provided security. In addition, the system created allies for the British and further fed the “military fiscalism” political structure. The land-holding arrangements that included zamindars and jagirdars, were set up by the Mughals and kept in place by the Company which helped to maintain the façade mentioned earlier. Because the Company wanted better efficiency, they tried to restructure the land-holding arrangements while still maintaining their core elements (peasants, zamindars etc.). Permanent Settlement was one form of land-holding that attempted to spur longevity of landlords. It backfired and resulted in zamindars selling their land to rich families who then controlled massive chunks of private land. This private land created a problem for the peasants who became tenants and had no right to the land. In reaction to Permanent Settlement, the Ryottwan system was put in place. In this system the land would be surveyed to see who the cultivators are. It assumed that villages were the base units of the Raj and was ultimately flawed because it favored the rich and more educated. The implementation of these land-holding arrangements showed how much power the Company actually had in the Raj and they are seen as means to imperializing India.

The political economy that the British created in India proved incredibly limiting for Indians. In the beginning, the Company was exporting finished products, but when the Industrial Revolution occurred in Britain, India became a machine for exporting cash crops (i.e. indigo and cotton). This resulted in the deskilling of the Indian population. The peasants and laborers essentially had to rely on the British to trade their goods because they were not making finished products. This was a move from imperialism to colonialism (daughter nation feeding mother nation raw materials). In addition, Britain had complete control of the seas, and the EIC monopolized export trade until 1833. Another mechanism used to control the Indians was slavery or indentured servitude. Peasants who were in debt to the Company were given the “opportunity” to go to the West Indies where they became indentured slaves and almost never returned to India. Finally, the political economy greatly impacted the social structure of India. During the Mughal Empire it was very easy to change your economic status despite what your caste was. With the census the caste system and Muslim social structures became official and binding. These social structures that were once somewhat trivial became rigid and unchangeable.

At first, the East India Company had the most power in India, but the British Crown would often affirm their control over the EIC. Throughout the rule of the East India Company, Parliament would pass legislation restricting the EIC and giving more power to the Crown. The following are major legislations that gradually took power away from the EIC. In 1773, the Regulating Act gave England ultimate control over things done by British people overseas. In the 1784 India Act, Britain puts tighter restrictions on the company’s activities and appoints a Governor General to oversee the actions for Parliament. This is a restructure in the governing body of India and is a step from indirect to direct rule. The Governor Generals often made imperialistic changes in India that suggested that the British were not there just to trade. For example, Lord Dalhousie, expanded the British territory greatly and created infrastructure such as the building of railroads and the establishment of telegraphs and postage. In 1813 the EIC Charter was revised to allow missionaries to come to India. The EIC did not want missionaries in India because they believed it would cause social unrest among the Indian people; after all, their goal was to maintain the pretense that the Mughal Empire was still in control. However, a missionary by the name of Charles Grant believed that the EIC should be more of a ruler than a trader in India. He believed that Christianity would lead to material prosperity in the Raj. In 1833, Parliament took even more power away from the EIC by abolishing the monopoly that they had in India. Finally, after the Sepoy Mutiny, the Company was cast aside and the British Crown rose as the direct ruler in India.

From this evidence, it is clear to see that the British intentionally made efforts to gain power and control in India and succeeded. Although, they may not have planned it that way from the beginning it was a colonial opportunity they knowingly grabbed. The British Crown used the East India Company, and the institutions they had in place, to establish a foundation for the eventual colonization of the Indian subcontinent.