

UNIT 65 – UPSC - Warren Hastings

India's History : Modern India : Death of Madhava Rao Peshwa; Warren Hastings appointed as Governor of Bengal : 1772

Warren Hastings



Hastings, Warren (1732-1818) Governor (1772-1774) and Governor General (1774-1785) of the fort william in Bengal. Warren Hastings abandoned the policy of hesitation of his predecessors about the question of establishing political dominance in India, and bringing about a series of reforms and waging wars against the challengers to his expansionist plan and conquering new lands. He laid the foundation of British power in India. But his contributions did not refrain parliament from impeaching him under manifold charges including corruption, oppression and unauthorised wars. He was recalled in 1785 and tried in parliament, but ultimately acquitted.

Warren Hastings was born at Churchill in Oxfordshire on 6 December 1732. His family was in reduced circumstances so he was brought up by an uncle, who took him to London and in 1743 sent him to school at Westminster, where he proved to be an excellent scholar. On leaving school he obtained a junior appointment in the east india company's Bengal service. He arrived at Calcutta in September 1750.

Hastings's first appointment was at kasimbazar, a major centre for procuring silk. He was at Kasimbazar in 1756 when Nawab sirajuddaula was provoked to attack and storm Calcutta, rounding up the British at Kasimbazar in the process. On his release Hastings joined the British refugees from Calcutta. He married one of them, Mary, widow of an officer who had been killed at Calcutta. Neither the first Mrs Hastings nor the two children that she bore her husband were to live long.

From 1758 Hastings served as the company's Resident at murshidabad with the new nawab, mir jafar, in whose favour the British had intervened at Palashi. In 1760 a coup engineered by the British brought down Mir Jafar and replaced him with another nawab, mir qasim. Shortly afterwards, Hastings went down to Calcutta and succeeded to the council that managed the company's affairs under a new governor, henry vansittart. Hastings allied with the governor in disputes that split the council about the extent to which the nawab should be permitted to regulate the private trade of British merchants. Hastings and Vansittart favoured conciliation. Tensions with the nawab, however, erupted into armed conflict and Mir Qasim was driven out of Bengal.

Vansittart resigned his governorship and returned to Britain. In January 1765 Hastings followed him.

In Britain Hastings sought to influence future Indian policy and to secure his return with a prestigious position. In 1768 he was appointed second in the council of the settlement at Fort St George, Madras.

Hastings spent two successful years at Madras. His management of the company's commercial concerns was particularly commended. In 1771 the directors of the East India Company, looking for a new governor of Bengal, chose Hastings. He returned to Calcutta on 17 February 1772.

Appointment as a Governor



Hastings saw himself in 1772 as governor of what he regarded as a province now fully part of the British empire. He dismissed formal acknowledgements of Mughal authority over Bengal as harmful fictions. He had orders to assert the company's direct authority over a government that had been largely delegated to Indian officials. He complied with alacrity. He had no qualms about making further incursions into areas of government allocated to the nawabs. He believed that sovereignty, a concept that he frequently invoked, was vested in the 'British nation' and that there must be no equivocation about that.

Hastings shared the view, universal among contemporary Europeans, that Bengal was a naturally rich province with a highly productive agriculture and skilled manufacturers that had suffered from misgovernment under its later Indian rulers and during the British take-over. It had been afflicted in 1770 by a very severe famine. The new regime's task was to enable recovery to take place. In the years after 1772 Hastings developed a distinctive point of view on how this should be done. He believed that Bengal must be governed in ways to which its people were presumed to be accustomed. Indian methods of government and Indian law must be preserved. The British should aim 'to rule this people with ease and moderation according to their own ideas, manners, and prejudices'.

Revenue was the central issue of early British government in India. The British were uncertain as to how much they could extract from the province without inflicting damage on it. In 1772 Hastings decided that the best way of finding out what Bengal could afford to pay was to invite competition for the right to collect revenue for a

period of five years. Where the existing zamindars or hereditary revenue managers, did not make adequate offers, higher bids would be accepted. This so-called 'farming' system was adjudged even by Hastings to have been a failure. For the rest of Hastings's administration the company negotiated revenue assessments year by year, usually with the zamindars.

As diwan of Bengal after 1765, the company acquired responsibility for administering civil justice, cases of property and inheritance being closely involved with the payment of revenue. Criminal justice was the concern of the nawab, who enforced the Islamic criminal law. Hastings believed that the British must intervene to restore a decayed system of indigenous justice. He created new hierarchies of courts, both civil and criminal, under British supervision. The law administered by the courts was to be the law already in force in Bengal. Hastings set about obtaining translations that would make this law accessible to those Europeans who had to administer it.



As governor of Bengal, Hastings had not only to direct the internal administration of a huge province, but he had to conduct complex diplomacy with Indian states and on occasions with other European powers. By the 1770s it was impossible for the British in Bengal or in their other settlements at Madras and Bombay to isolate themselves from the new order of states that was replacing the Mughal empire. Hastings had no ambition to make new conquests, but he was strongly in favour of seeking influence by alliances. His ideal of peaceful influence over allies bore little relation, however, to the way events were to unfold. The company was to be repeatedly drawn into war, beginning with a war against the Rohillas in 1774 fought to strengthen the company's major ally in northern India, the nawab-wazir of Oudh in whose territory British troops were maintained.

In 1773 the national government in Britain intervened to impose reforms on the East India Company. Authority in Bengal was to be concentrated in a governor general and a new Supreme Council of five. A Supreme Court, staffed by royal judges, was also to be established in Calcutta. Hastings was chosen as the first governor general, but three men, John Clavering, George Monson and Philip Francis, were sent out to join the council directly from Britain.

The three new councillors from Britain began an unremitting opposition to Hastings immediately after their arrival in Calcutta on 19 October 1774. Acting together, they constituted a majority. They quickly professed to find corruption behind every policy of the old government and to believe that Hastings was allowing the resources of Bengal to be plundered and wasted. Francis, an intellectual of a calibre to match Hastings, was a particularly formidable opponent of the governor general.

The new councillors began by denouncing the war against the Rohillas. Hastings's revenue policy was also condemned and Indians were encouraged to bring accusations of personal corruption against him. The leading accuser was maharaja nanda kumar, who evidently calculated that he stood to gain ample rewards were the new councillors to displace Hastings. His accusations of bribe-taking were probably much exaggerated, but it is likely that Hastings had received some irregular payments. Before anything could be proved, charges of forgery were brought against Nanda Kumar in the new Supreme Court. He was found guilty, sentenced to death and executed on 5 August 1775. Critics of Hastings from his own time onwards have drawn the not unreasonable inference that he promoted the prosecution and may have influenced the verdict. What can be established is that the prosecution against Nanda Kumar was promoted by his Indian enemies with the encouragement of Hastings's friends.

Hastings recovered control over the government as two of his opponents, Monson and Clavering, died, leaving Francis alone to carry on the opposition against Hastings. After fighting a duel against Hastings on 17 August 1780, in which he was slightly wounded, Francis finally left India.

Hastings remained in office until 1785. War was the main source of the difficulties that he faced in his last years. From 1778 the British were fighting the Marathas. In 1780 the formidable armies of Mysore invaded the Carnatic territory which was under the protection of the British. In January 1781 the first French expeditionary force arrived in India to support Mysore.

Hastings took credit for the diplomacy that broke up the formidable Indian coalition opposing him and for sending money, supplies and troops on a very large scale from Bengal to Madras, thus enabling the Mysore forces to be pushed back and the French to be contained. With some justification, Hastings saw himself as the saviour of the British empire in India. Nevertheless, the scale of the wars did Hastings great damage with opinion in Britain. He was accused of being a warmonger with a lust for conquest that had landed the company in ruinously expensive wars.

The needs of the war were the cause of some very contentious dealings by Hastings with the company's dependants and allies in northern India. Chait Singh, the raja of Benares, was required to pay an increased subsidy to the company. On the pretext that he was evading legitimate demands, Hastings proposed to exact a large fine from him on a personal visit in 1781. The raja's retainers resisted and forced Hastings to flee from the city.

Although British authority was quickly restored, the episode left a strong impression that Hastings had acted tyrannically as well as subjecting himself to needless risks. From Benares Hastings went on to try to raise extra funds from the company's ally the nawab of Oudh by forcing him to resume alienation of land revenue and to confiscate a large hoard of treasure in the possession of his mother and grandmother, the Begums of Oudh. Again, Hastings appeared to have acted with a ruthless high-handedness.

Throughout his governorship, Hastings was a generous patron of the arts and of learning. He took a particular pride in the translation of the Bhagavat Gita made by Charles Wilkins, for which he wrote a memorable preface. His interests laid the foundations for the creation of the Bengal Asiatic Society (now Asiatic Society) of 1784.

In February 1785, in failing health, Hastings resigned his office. He landed in England on 13 June 1785, after an absence of over sixteen years. He had not unreasonable expectations of acclaim and honours on his return, but he was in fact to meet attacks that culminated with his being put on trial. The trial began in 1788 and lasted until he was acquitted in 1795.

Unfortunately for Hastings, Edmund Burke, whose revulsion against what he saw as gross misgovernment in British India had focused on Hastings, was not prepared to let him go. Burke had undoubtedly fallen under the influence of Philip Francis after his return to Britain in 1780, but he had formed his own views about India and he was driven by a passionate concern for justice. He believed that the East India Company was laying India waste by rapacious policies within its own provinces, by the exploitation of its allies and by its wars. He held Hastings to be responsible for all this. In 1786 Burke produced charges for an impeachment to be voted by the House of Commons and then to be heard by the House of Lords. The first charge, which related to the Rohilla war, was thrown out by the Commons, but the second, on Hastings's dealings with the raja of Benares, was passed, as were others introduced in the 1787 session of Parliament. On 10 May 1787 Hastings was formally impeached.

Huge crowds attended the early sessions of the trial that was regarded as a great public spectacle. But by 30 May 1791, when the prosecution closed their case, few could doubt that the tide was running in Hastings's favour. In a new climate of opinion with a more assertive British nationalism in reaction to the French Revolution, empire came increasingly to be seen as part of Britain's greatness rather than as a cause of shame. Hastings's claims to have been the saviour of empire were therefore viewed sympathetically. In 1795, when the Lords gave judgement, in every case a large majority voted 'not guilty'.

The stark legal alternatives of 'guilty' or 'not guilty' are an inappropriate basis for any assessment of a career as complex as Hastings's. It is impossible to endorse Burke's extravagantly vituperative abuse of him. Few would now believe that he deserved impeachment let alone being found guilty. On the other hand, the argument that he had no significant case to answer, beyond some minor blemishes committed in a good cause and was the victim of Francis's envy and Burke's malice is not sustainable.

Strictly within the terms argued out in the impeachment, Hastings was vulnerable to accusations of high-handedness in Benares and Oudh and he had accumulated a fortune by methods that the new official morality of the late eighteenth century did not sanction.

Any assessment of him on terms that go beyond those of the Impeachment must recognise Hastings's exceptional qualities of mind, he brought a creative intelligence of a very high order to Indian government. He also showed an appreciation of Indian culture and a regard for individual Indian people most unusual in any British official in high office at any time. Partly in reaction to him, future British administration in India would be more closely bound by rules and more distant from Indians.

After his acquittal in 1795, Hastings lived for another 23 years. His life was that of a country gentleman, engaged in local affairs and farming the ancestral family estate that he had been able to recover. Public employment never came again, but at least in the last years of his life, he was treated with much respect and received some public recognition. He died on 22 August 1818 in his 85th year.

Death of Madhava Rao Peshwa



1737 saw the death of the Peshwa brothers, Baji Rao and Chimaji. Baji Rao's son, Balaji Bajirao (Nanasaheb) succeeded as the Peshwa. The three brothers Nanasaheb, Sadashivrao and Raghunathrao continued the able rule of Peshwa for the next 25 years. The 1761 Panipat battle, between Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdalli, destroyed both Abdalli and Peshwas. Though Marathas won the war, they had to face a hard blow when they lost Sadashivrao and Nanasaheb Peshwa's eldest son. Nanasaheb died grief-stricken in the same year. His second son Thorale Madhav Rao assumed the title. And his uncle Raghunath Rao acted as his care taker.

Madhavrao Peshwa defeated Haider Ali of Mysore and Nizam of Hyderabad. In 1769, Marathas led by Mahadaji Shinde, headed the North India campaign. They defeated the Jats and took hold of Agra and Mathura. They reinstated the Mughal Emperor on the throne, who was living on the East India Company Pension.

After Madhav Rao Peshwa's death in 1772, Raghunathrao's attempts to be the Peshwa were foiled by the ministers. Hurt, he joined the British. The state came under the rule of ministers headed by Nana Phadnavis and Mahadaji Shinde.