

Module - III

Military History of the Colonial Era



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COLONIAL ERA AND THE INDIAN SEPOY

From our previous lessons we learnt about how the military system came into existence in India and what changes took place over the centuries. In this lesson let us try to understand how the Europeans came into India and ruled our land and in the process laid the foundation for the Indian army, capable of fighting modern day wars.

As you know, India has its natural mountain barriers in the North called the Himalayas and in the South flanked by the Arabian Sea in the West and the Bay of Bengal in the East, thus forming a peninsular India. It is a land of a multi cultural and multi ethnic society with a variety of religions and languages.

After the Mughal rule the English started colonizing India. India then was not a one-nation country with a strong central army or King. This existence of many smaller states favored the European settlements. First came the Portuguese, followed by the French and the British.



Objectives

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- explain the history of colonial rule in India;
- describe the establishment of the three Presidencies- Madras, Kolkata and Mumbai;
- identify the events leading to the formation of the 'Native Indian Army' by the English and trace the rank structure in the British army.

9.1 History of Colonial Rule

From the military history point of view it is important to review the prevailing situation in India when the Europeans set foot here. Throughout history from ancient times, small kingdoms were comparatively weaker and hence were exploited and conquered. India was a fragmented state, which allowed the British to exploit, and this was the only reason why they succeeded in enslaving the country. There were the Jats, Marathas, Nizam, Rajputs etc. Unfortunately they were not a one big kingdom but

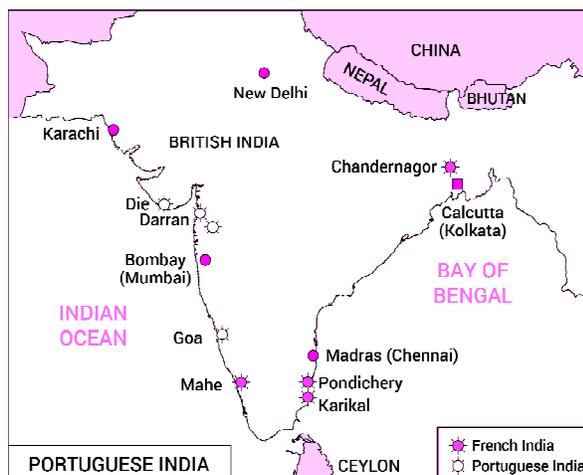


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consisted of small princely states, zamindars etc. This period of our history saw four major countries of Europe that came to India for trade and commerce because our country was rich in tradition, wealth and culture. The countries involved were Portugal, France, Holland and Gt. Britain. Let us see each of their exploits starting from the 16th Century to 1947.

9.1.1 The Portuguese in India

Do you know who came first and explored our India? It was the Portuguese. The opening up of seaborne trade of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean to India made a historic revolution in Indian History. By the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese explored not only the western coast of Africa but also a portion of the mainland beyond the Cape of Good Hope. The original idea of sending the Portuguese that was of the Pope to find the direct sea routes to the resource rich countries especially for the spices and promote Christianity. It was Vasco da Gama who landed in Calicut in India on May 17, 1498. To utilize the rich resource of India and also for the development of their commerce, factories were established and the main aim was to ensure trade. Portuguese occupied the Indian territory by not only establishing factories on the coast of India, but also by establishing military garrisons at a number of strategic points, i.e. at the entrance of the Red Sea and elsewhere outside India to make sure that these strategic places were under their control to do business. They set up military garrisons in India in order to avoid any conflicts with the local Zamorins of Calicut as well as with the Muslim rulers. They also appointed a Viceroy to administer Portuguese nationals. At the beginning of 1505 Francisco d'Almeida set out in command of a large fleet and 1500 soldiers, with orders to build fortresses at Kilwa, Anjadiva, Kannanur and Cochin. In 1510, Alfonso de Albuquerque captured Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur and made it the capital of the Portuguese eastern empire. A second important centre for the Portuguese in India was Diu in Gujarat. Portuguese spread in India is shown on the map (Map 9.1).



Map 9.1 Portuguese India



Note



Intext Questions

9.1

1. Who came first and explored India?
2. Who landed in Calicut, India in 1498?

9.1.2 The Dutch in India

Do you know who these Dutch people were? The people of Holland are called the Dutch. After the Portuguese the Dutch also explored the high seas and crossed the Indian Ocean and landed in Indian Territory for trade purposes. In 1602 the United East India Company of Netherland was formed and permission was given by the Dutch government to trade with the East Indies including India. All these settlers established their factories in strategic locations in order to attract and develop their business. It also enabled them to easily go back to their home country. In 1605, Admiral Van der Hagen established the first Dutch factory in Masulipattanam in Andhra Pradesh. The other factories that were built were in Pettapoli (Nizamapatanam), Tirupuliyur and Devenampatnam. The Dutch negotiated with the king of Chandragiri in 1610 and had another factory at Pulicat and it was fortified and named as Geldria. The Chief of Pulicat Van den Broecke became the governor and made a factory at Surat. In 1627 Dutch Bengal was established. The Dutch in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Agra and Burhanpur, Bimlipatam, Karikal, Chinsura, Patna, Balasore, Cochin, Kasimbazar, Gustavus constructed several factories and forts. The other Dutch factories in India were successful than the Portuguese.

The British faced tough challenge for the Dutch, while establishing themselves. This resulted in wars between them. Due to the Anglo-Dutch rivalry, Trivancore Marthanda Varma gave a fatal blow to the Dutch East India Company in the battle of Colachel in 1741, which resulted in complete defeat of Dutch power in Malabar. As a result the British made use of this victory and so they captured the Dutch strongholds.

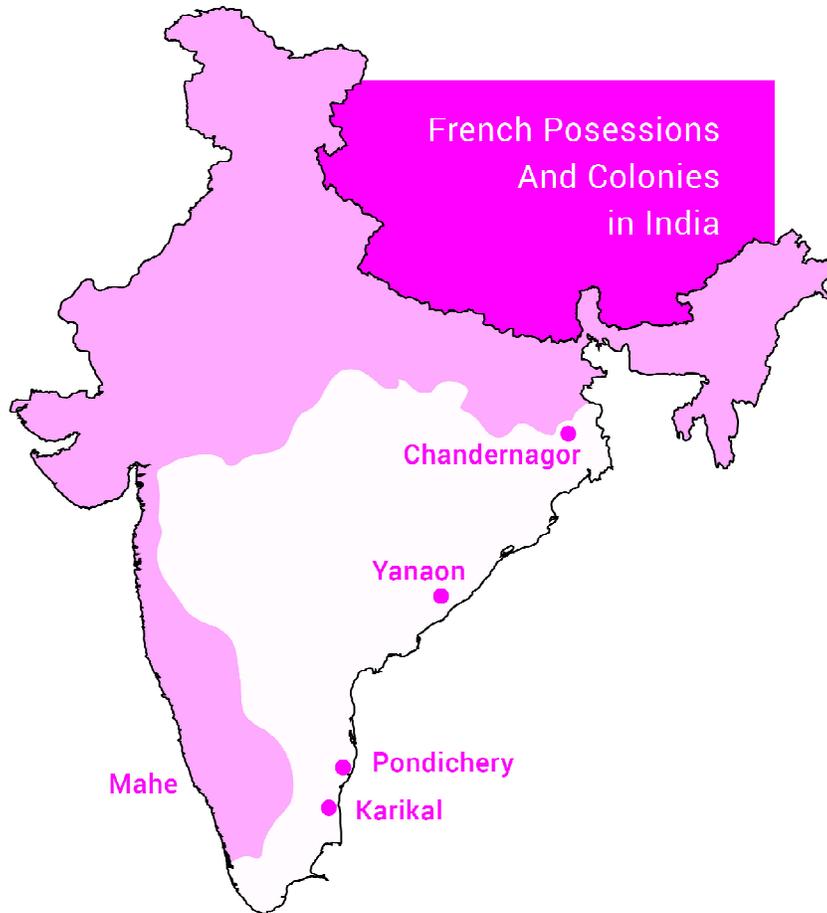
9.1.3 The French in India

After the Portuguese and the Dutch, the French also established their companies. In 1664 Jean-Baptiste Colbert founded the French East India Company (Map 9.2). The company established its first factory at Surat under Francis Caron in 1668 and the Second factory was established a year later in Masulipattanam. French East India Company under Francois Martin in 1674 established a trading centre at Pondicherry. In 1693 Dutch captured Pondicherry but returned it to French later. The French acquired Mahe in 1720, Yanam in 1731, and Karaikal in 1738. The other factory they established was in Chandranagar in Bengal. In 1701 Pondicherry was made the capital of French settlements in India. Francois Martin was the President and the Superior Council and director general of French affairs in India. Later in 1742, Joseph Francois Dupleix took charge of the French empire in India. In 1746 he captured Madras but failed to take the neighboring British fort St. David. There were series of fights between the French and the British. In 1744 a British Officer Robert Clive arrived in India who

shattered the hopes of Dupleix to create French Colonies in India. During the Seven Years War (1756-63) between France and England, the French forces were defeated and the capital was captured in 1761. The French East India Company lacked support of their government. In 1765 Pondicherry was returned to the French after a peace treaty with England. After the Napoleonic wars in 1816, all the establishments from Pondicherry, Karaikal, Yanam, Mahe, Chandernagore, Surat, Machilipatnam and Kozhikode were returned to France. The French colonies in India remained separate from British India, without any interference.



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Map 9.2



Intext Question

9.2

1. Who established first Dutch factory in Masulipatnam?
2. Mention few places where the Dutch established their factories in India.
3. Who established the French East India Company in India?

9.1.4 The British in India

As we have seen already that the British East India Company established its presence in India way back in 1612, wherein they established factories in India for trading

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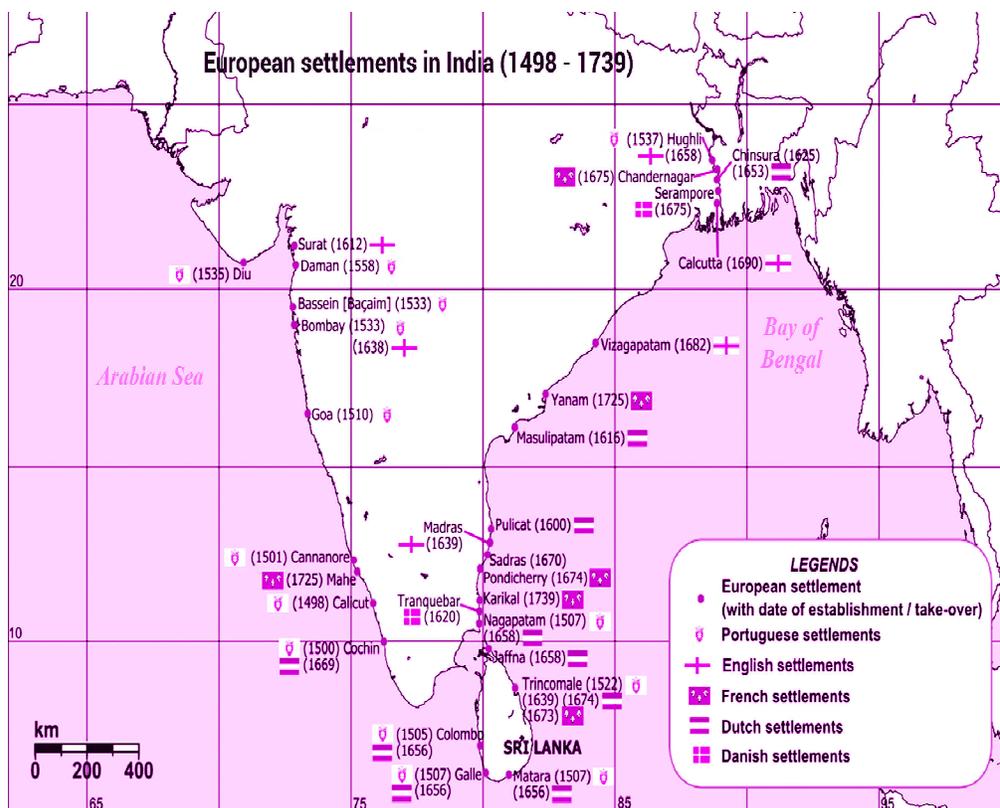
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Colonial Era and the Indian Sepoy

purposes. The Company slowly consolidated its foothold by being friendly with all the local rulers and cleverly exploited their weaknesses. As was the case with other Europeans, the British East India Company also had a few troops, which were later supported by locally recruited sepoy. The Company won a major victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which became the remarkable beginning of its foothold in Eastern India. The Strength of the East India Company increased after its victory in 1764 at the Battle of Buxar in which it defeated the combined Mughal armies of Nawab of Bengal, Nawab of Awadh and King Shah Alam II and expanded its territory around its bases in Bombay and Madras. The Anglo-Mysore Wars (1766 -1799) and the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1772-1818) gave way to the control of the vast region of India south of Narmada River. Indians in almost all the regions of the country contested the Company's rule. They could not stop the rebellions and therefore in order to suppress the rebellions, the British Parliament passed a bill to take over the administration of India from the East India Company by the British Crown on 2nd August 1858, immediately after the First Indian War of Independence in 1857. The East India Company was condemned by the British Government for their lack of control and allowing this event to take place.



Map 9.3- European Settlement in India

To avoid further disaster in future the company surrendered all their powers to the Crown. The title of Viceroy was introduced who was the representative of the British Crown in India. A complete picture of the presence of various colonies is given in the map given above (Map 9.3).



Activity

9.1

You have learnt how the Europeans came and established the ports in India. Identify the port cities where the foreigners built factories.

9.2 Idea of the Three Presidencies

What is the meaning of the word Presidency? It means an office where the President sits and controls the area under him/her. Why did the British come up with the idea of Presidencies? As you have seen, the British established factories and started trade in large number of commodities. The control and administration of the factories and the people employed by the British was to be coordinated under one person. They built Fort St George in Chennai and later established the **Madras Presidency** in 1684. William Gyfford became the first President. What started off as a Headquarters for administration later started controlling other areas militarily. The British started expanding their control into Mysore, Thanjavur, Vishakapattinam etc in the South and similarly, areas around Kolkotta and Mumbai. This led to fights with the local rulers and with the established kingdoms of the Nizam, Marathas, Rajputs and the Nawab of Bengal. The role of the Presidencies created in **Kolkatta, Chennai and Mumbai** were as follows:-

- To have an administrative office to control the activity of trade and commerce from the ports.
- To ensure the safety and security of the goods and services of the trading companies.
- To build a strong army in order to expand and establish control in India.
- The Company's military under Robert Clive fought many battles to establish its supremacy and control over India. The main battles fought were the 1757 Battle of Plassey, the 1764 Battle of Buxar (in Bihar) and The Company thus became the de facto ruler of large areas of the lower Gangetic plains by 1773.
- It also proceeded slowly to expand its dominions around Bombay and Madras. The Anglo-Mysore Wars (1766-99) and the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1772-1818) ensured its control of large areas of India south of the Sutlej River.
- Establish a civil-military rule in India.

The famous quote that "the Sun never sets in British Empire" which indicates the expansion of the British Colonies across the globe. Wherever the British conquered countries they became permanent settlers. Thus, the three Presidencies of Madras, Bengal and Bombay were created both as administrative as well as military centers.

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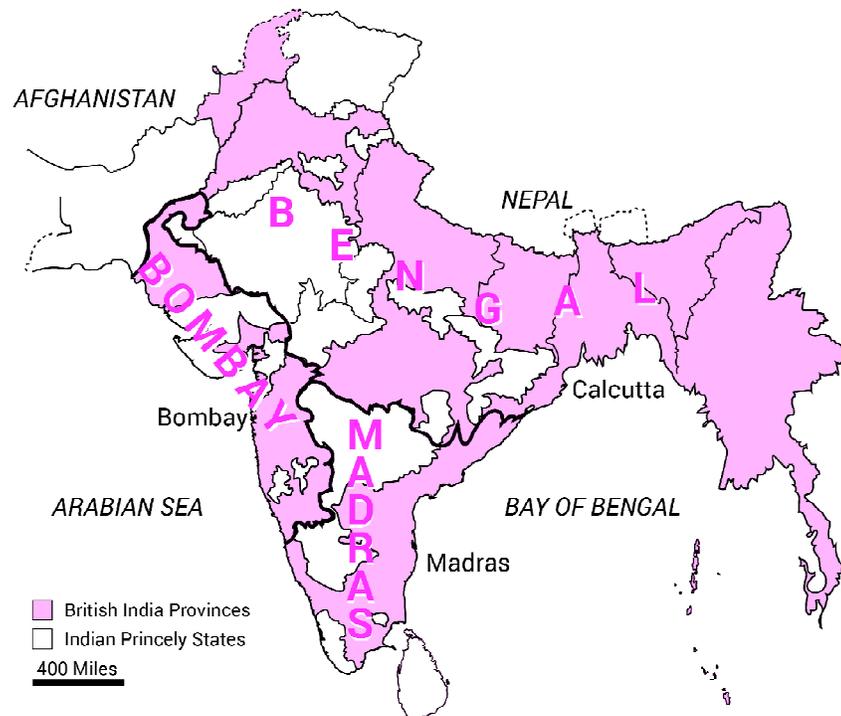


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1. What is the meaning of Presidency?
2. When was Bengal Presidency established?

9.2.1 The Organisation of the Presidencies

Having created the Presidencies the East India Company made an organization, in each of these locations, to rule the areas, which were annexed by them. The Presidencies had one Governor who was the head and assisted by a council of four members. This included one Commander-in-chief of the Army. Each of these presidencies had its own army and was called Bengal Presidency (the Bengal Army), Madras Presidency (the Madras Army) and Bombay Presidency (the Bombay Army). They had regular regiments of British soldiers and officers. Slowly the Company started recruiting Indian natives to serve as sepoys in these armies. You will learn in the later sections how men were selected to become soldiers. In the map (Map 9.5) given below, you can see the territory controlled by each of these presidencies with Bengal being the largest and Bombay the smallest.



Map 9.5 - Administrative areas of India in the 1930s

9.3 Native Indian Army

The western countries believe that Indian army became a professional army because of the British. This is wrong. You have seen in the previous lessons on how well we had established armies and fought various wars. You will learn later how popular Western



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perception on the origins and ethos of the Indian Army emphasizes that it was the period from the mid eighteenth century to the period when India gained Independence from the British rule in which the Indian Army emerged as a cohesive fighting army. However, you have learnt that Indians were past masters raising armies and having effective functional organizations since as early as the vedic times. Therefore, in this section we will first see the state of India, its empires and the armies so that one can understand how the Dutch, Portuguese, the French and the English exploited us and ruled over India for 200 years, and plundered our wealth and honour.

The origin of the British Indian Army and subsequently the army of independent India lies in the origins of the Presidency Armies, which preceded them. The first purely Indian troops employed by the British were watchmen employed in each of the Presidencies of the British East India Company to protect their trading stations. These were all placed in 1748 under one Commander-in-chief, Major-General Stringer Lawrence who is regarded as the "Father of the Indian Army". From the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Company began to maintain armies at each of its three main stations, or Presidencies of British India, at Calcutta (Bengal), Madras and Bombay. The Bengal Army, Madras Army, and Bombay Army were quite distinct, each with its own Regiments and cadre of European officers. All three armies contained European regiments in which both the officers and men were Europeans, as well as a larger number of 'Native' regiments, in which the officers were Europeans and the other ranks were Indians. They included Artillery, Cavalry and Infantry regiments and historical sources refer to the Bengal/Madras/Bombay Artillery/Cavalry/Infantry (the latter often termed 'Native Infantry' or 'N.I.'). From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the Crown began to dispatch regiments of the regular British Army to India, to reinforce the Company's armies. These troops were often referred to as 'H.M.'s Regiments' or 'Royal regiments'. By 1824, the size of the combined armies of Bengal, Madras, and Bombay was about 200,000 and 16 European regiments. In 1844 the combined average strength of the three armies was 235,446 native and 14,584 European.

It is important to understand that the sea played a vital role in colonial era because the European powers began to send their ships to India for trade. The ships of Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and England fought with each other on their way, in the high seas, more out of trade rivalry than any military significance. It will be seen later that the British very cleverly and systematically overcame the French, Dutch and Portuguese to establish themselves to rule over India for almost 200 years. The first factor was that, Great Britain had established a very strong navy and was considered a great naval power. It gave them the force and mobility to go to any part of the world and build their business. The second was the wealth of India and the desire and greed of the British to prosper at the cost of Indians. The third and the most important factor, which helped them to succeed, was that India was divided amongst small princely states and there was no single unifying ruler. The Mughals in the North were a declining power and so were the Marathas in the South. The decision that the Englishmen took to recruit Indians in their force can be considered as the starting point for the



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development of the present day Indian Army. Obedience, hard work, patience, preparing them to work under any circumstances formed the basic ethos and life of an Army soldier.

9.3.1 Identification of warrior class among Indian Society

Can you imagine a person without physical or mental fitness serving in the military? No. The person has to be physically fit and should fulfil the criteria required by the services. Therefore, the British recruited heavily from what they called as the 'martial races' for service in the colonial army. The Marathas, Mysore army in the South and Bengalis in the East created maximum problems for the British. Also, the Rajputs, Jats and the Gurkhas were used to resist and fight with the Mughals and had the spirit of a warrior.

The British, therefore created a Martial race and named the Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs and Gurkhas as martial race communities. They did not include the South Indians and Bengalis. The British wanted to create a caste difference and recruit only those whom they considered as being loyal to the British Raj and the community. 'Martial race' comprised typically brave and well-built men who had been warriors traditionally suited to the soldiers. Men from these communities had developed qualities.

Do you know which was the first army in British India? The Bengal Army was among the first to come together to form a impressive unit, with recruits coming mostly from Awadh (present-day Uttar Pradesh). The Hindu upper-caste from the Bengal Native Army had a collective common interest. The Indian troops in the English East India Company's service were recruited as infantrymen and commanded only by the European officers.

The increase in the number of troops became essential between 1763 and 1805 and it is accounted that the Bengal army grew from 6,680 to 64,000 men, the Madras army from 9,000 to 64,000, and the Bombay army from 2,550 to 26,500.

Each Presidency army had a overall commands. For example, the officer who commanded the Bengal army was the commander in chief and so it was for other Presidency armies also. The recruitment of South Indians was required to defend the British Empire against the French and also essential support units such as Engineers, Artillery and cavalry were required. South Indians were recruited for such regiments. This system continued upto the 1857 mutiny. The East India Company with its native Indian army could not defeat the rebellion.

This prompted the Queen of England to establish British rule and have a proper army. Thereafter the British had a relook at their requirement of army and made a policy of recruiting soldiers from the Sikhs, Dogras, Gurkhas and select Muslim communities from Punjab and Baluchistan. These soldiers were also tested in many places including World War I and II.

The Gurkhas were also promised to be taken to England and serve the Queen later. That is why you have Gurkha regiments in today's British army. The British used the word 'Native' to describe Indians and hence we have the word Native Indian Army. The British used this term during the period of recruitment.

9.3.2 Rank Structure in the British Army in India

We saw how the recruitment took place for sepoys of the Indian army. Let us now move on to the rank structures. The rank structures are very much essential to have command and control in the units.

Ranks are prestigious to the army. Before we see the ranks in the army let us understand why we need these ranks. Just as in a factory we have the supervisor and manager, we have ranks in the army. The reasons for having ranks are:-

- Command and control during war & peace.
- Better administration of Army
- Some ranks were created to act as a link between the British officers and the sepoys.

In the British Indian army, the term Sepoy was a designation given to the Indian soldier. They were from the local communities of the Bombay and Madras presidencies. As mentioned earlier, the sepoy in the Bengal army was from high class Brahmin family. The basic chain of command started with the European captain at the top, followed by subaltern, sergeant majors (also European), under whom were subedars, jamadars, and havildar-naiks (recruiting agents).

The sepoys (native soldiers) in each battalion were divided into ten companies that comprised one subedar, three jamadars, four naiks, two drummers, one trumpeter, and seventy sepoys. Earlier the subedar had commanded an independent company, now his company became one among nine or ten that made up a battalion.



What You Have Learnt

- The colonial powers originated from Europe
- They came to India for trade and commerce
- There was lack of unity among Indian rulers then
- The colonial powers had hatred among themselves and fought with each other
- They organized armies for the security for the three Presidencies in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta and later they started recruiting soldiers regularly from Native Indians
- The high level officers belonged to British while the lower level soldiers were from the natives
- Rank structures were introduced slowly to these armies



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Terminal Exercises

1. Name the countries of Europe that came to India for trade and commerce.
2. How did the Portuguese occupy the Indian territory?
3. How did the British capture the Dutch strongholds in Eastern India?
4. Which of the combined armies that the Britishers defeated at the battle of Buxar in 1764?
5. What does the title of Viceroy signify?
6. Mention the role of Presidencies created by the Britishers in India.
7. Give any two factors that led to British supremacy over the French and Dutch.
8. What are the reasons for introducing structures in India?



Answers to Intext Questions

9.1

1. The Dutch.
2. Vasco Da Gama.

9.2

1. Admiral Van Der Hagen
2. Masulipattinam, Pettapoli, Pulicat.
3. Francois Martin

9.3

1. Presidency means an office where the President sits and controls the area under him/her.
2. 1765

