

## Establishment of British Empire in India

Aurangzeb was the last of the powerful Mughal rulers. He established control over a very large part of the territory that is now known as India. After his death in 1707 AD, many Mughal governors (*subedars*) and big *zamindars* began asserting their authority and establishing regional kingdoms. As powerful regional kingdoms emerged in various parts of India, Delhi could no longer function as an effective centre.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, a new power was emerging on the political horizon – the British. Did you know that the British originally came as a small trading company? How then did they come to be masters of a vast empire?

### East India Company Comes to East

In 1600 AD, the East India Company acquired a charter from the ruler of England, Queen Elizabeth I, granting it the sole right to trade with the East. This meant that no other trading group in England could compete with the East India Company. With this charter the Company could venture across the oceans, looking for new lands from which it could buy goods at a cheap price, and carry them back to Europe to sell at higher prices. The Company did not have to fear competition from other English trading companies.

### Mercantilism

Mercantile is a business enterprise that makes profit primarily through trade. Trading companies in those days made

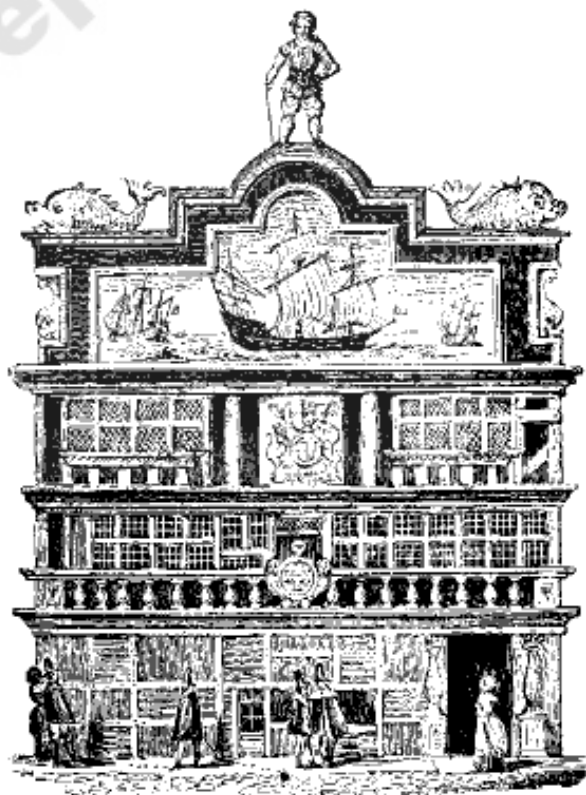


Fig 17.1 The headquarters of East India Company in London.



Fig 17.2  
*VascodaGama.*

profit primarily by excluding competition, so that they could buy cheap and sell dear.

The royal charter, however, could not prevent other European powers from entering the Eastern markets.

By the time the first English ships sailed down the west coast of Africa, round the Cape of Good Hope, and crossed the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese had already established their presence in the western coast of India, and had their base in Goa. It was Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese explorer, who had discovered this sea route to India in 1498. By the early seventeenth century, the Dutch (Holland) too were exploring the possibilities of trade in the Indian Ocean.

Soon the French traders arrived on the scene.

The problem was that all the companies were interested in buying the same things. The fine qualities of cotton and silk produced in India had a big market in Europe. Spices like pepper, cloves, cardamom and cinnamon too were in great demand. Competition amongst the European companies inevitably pushed up the prices at which the goods were purchased. Trade was carried on with arms and trading posts were protected through fortification. This effort to fortify settlements and carry on profitable trade also led to intense conflict with local rulers.

### Armed Traders

European traders formed their own companies to trade in India. The English traders formed the English East India Company while traders from France formed the French East India Company. Both companies fought against each other for many years to capture the trade in India.

Each made efforts to drive the other away. They brought armies from England and France to help them in their fight. The kings of England and France also backed their respective companies and helped them in many ways. The companies acquired land in India and built their own forts to wage battles against each other.



Fig 17.3 *A drawing of Machilipatnam from 1676.*

The wealth that was accumulated in this way was one of the most important factors that enabled England to develop industries and establish their dominance in the world.

This was the time when England as well as some other European countries like Spain, Portugal, France, Holland and Germany were acquiring colonies in North and South America, Africa, and Asia. The colonies contributed to the power and wealth of these European countries.

The Mughal emperors as well as many rajas and nawabs began to realise how dangerous it was to let such traders maintain armies, build forts, fight battles and use military force to establish their economic power in their kingdoms.

As long as the Mughal empire was strong, it had not been possible for the European companies to establish their own military power in India. In fact Emperors Shahjahan and Aurangzeb had fought and defeated the European companies on a number of occasions. Some years after the death of Aurangzeb, the different provinces of the empire became almost independent and were ruled by their respective governors. Thus Bengal, Awadh (Lucknow) and Hyderabad became independent kingdoms which only nominally acknowledged the Mughal Emperor as their supreme.

Once the Mughal empire broke up into these small kingdoms, the companies found their chance to assert their power. Though the rajas and nawabs wanted more trade they



*Fig 17.4 Mughal Emperor Shah Alam granted Robert Clive the right to rule Bengal.*

tried to check the growing military strength of the companies.

For example, in 1764 AD, Nawab Anwaruddin Khan of Arcot (in northern Tamil Nadu) sent his army to fight against the French company. However, to the astonishment of all, the small French army managed to defeat the large army of the Nawab. The European traders became bolder after this victory and felt they could do whatever they wanted in India because of the strength of their armies.

How were the European armies different from the armies of Indian rulers in the 1700's? The soldiers of European armies were better trained and received higher and more regular salaries. They also had better cannons and guns. The European armies held parades and drills every day. With such regular exercise, Indian soldiers enrolled in these armies also became quite skilled in battle.



## Growing European Interference in the Kingdoms of India

The companies used their military advantage to increase their profits from trade. On many occasions when they saw two Indian rulers fighting among themselves, they would take sides and get involved in the fight. They would lend their army to one side to help them defeat their rivals. But, in return, the companies would demand and extract many trade concessions from the rulers. The rulers also ‘gifted’ the companies large amounts of money in return for their military help. This money helped the companies increase their trade even more.

For example, Dupleix, a governor of the French East India Company, helped Muzaffar Jang to become the Nizam of Deccan. In return Muzaffar Jang gave the French some territories near Pondicherry and the town of Machilipatnam. He also gave Rs. 50,000 to the Company, Rs. 50,000 to the French troops, and Rs. 20,00,000 and a *Jagir* worth Rs. 1,00,000 per year to Dupleix.

The companies also began to acquire small parts of kingdoms as ‘gifts’ from the local rulers. They would collect land tax from the villages and towns in these areas and use the money for their trading activities. They also used this money for maintaining and improving their army.

Slowly, the English Company began emerging victorious over the French Company in the struggle for dominance in India.

## Misuse of the Company’s Power

The Indian rulers soon found that the burden of giving ‘gifts’ to the English East India Company and bearing the expenses of its army was becoming very heavy. They were also troubled by many other things the company was doing.

Some Indian rulers exempted the company from paying taxes on many of the goods it purchased from their kingdoms. However, people began taking advantage of these concessions. For example, employees of the company would do their

own private trading. But they would show their own goods as belonging to the company to escape paying taxes. In this way, while the company got richer, its employees

*Fig 17.5 Local boats bring goods from ships in Madras, painted by William Simpson, 1867.*



and officers also made a lot of money in India and returned home wealthy. Many Indian traders and *seths* helped the company in its trade. They, too, showed their goods as belonging to the Company to escape paying taxes.

Thus, there was much looting and swindling taking place in the kingdoms under the Company. So proud was the Company of its military strength that it began working with great impudence. It forced craftsmen to sell their goods at low prices. In the areas it had acquired, the company tried to squeeze revenue from the peasants beyond reasonable limits. When the rulers protested against such practices, the English fought against them. They even went to the extent of dethroning kings and anointing successors who would be only too willing to remove any obstacles in the way of their trade.

- ◆ Traders need money to buy the goods they sell to others. List three sources of money that helped the English to buy goods in India.
- ◆ What advantages did the Indian rulers get from the English?

### **The English Impose their Rule**

The English gradually began to feel that they could make fuller and freer use of India for trade if they themselves ruled the country. So they began removing the nawabs and rajas and started ruling themselves.

In 1757 AD, the English defeated Sirajuddaula, the Nawab of Bengal, at a place called Plassey and established their rule over Bengal. The Battle of Plassey is an important event in Indian history. After

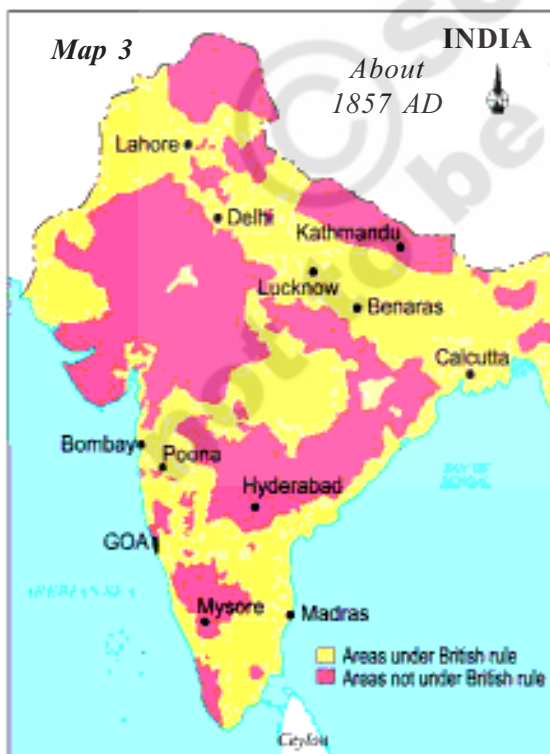
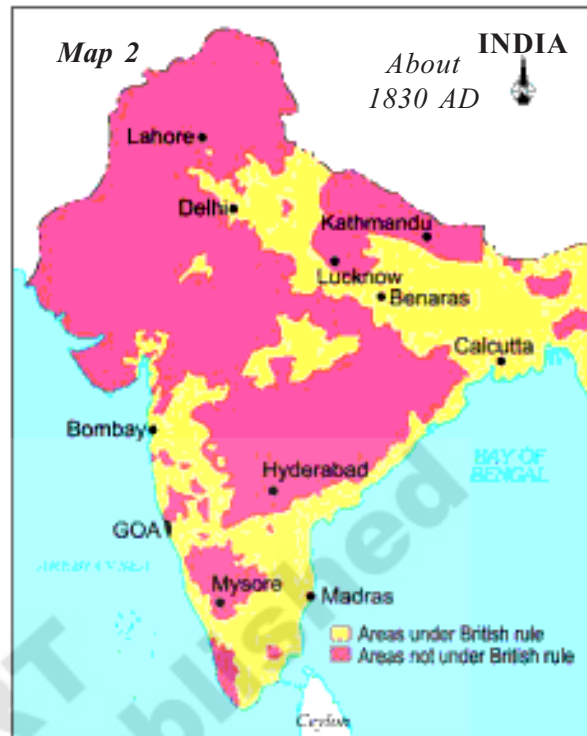
that, the English started conquering many of the kingdoms of India, big and small.

The English East India Company also forced the Nizam of Hyderabad to hand over the coastal Andhra Pradesh districts (Krishna, East Godavari, West Godavari, Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram, Prakasam Visakhapatnam and Guntur,) between the years 1765-1768. These were known as the 'Northern Sarkars' of the Madras province of the company. In return the English agreed to maintain an army contingent for the use of the Nizam. In fact this army was used more to control the Nizam rather than to help him.

Many rajas and nawabs saw through the British plot and fought hard against them. They included Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore, the Maratha sardar Mahadji Scindia, Nana Phadnawis and others. But their kingdoms were small and, one by one, they lost to the English.

Among those who played an important role in the British success on the battlefield were generals Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and Lord Wellesley. Slowly, large areas of India came under the direct rule of the English. In many places, the rajas and nawabs continued to rule, but they were under the sovereignty of the English. An English official (known as the 'resident') would be assigned to stay in the court of these kings or nawabs so that the British government could keep an eye on how they ran their kingdoms.

- ◆ While carrying on trade with India, why did the English East India Company start thinking of establishing its rule over the country?



*Maps showing expansion of the British territorial power in India.*

- ◆ Look at these maps along with a present day political map of India. In each of these maps, try and identify the different parts of India that were not under the British rule.
- ◆ How far did English rule spread by 1857? Make a list of those areas where Indian kings still ruled in 1857.

## Discontent with English Rule

The English had to fight with many kings and nawabs to establish their rule. You will learn more about their policies and administration in later years. They constantly faced resistance from the people of India.

The royal families resisted them because the English would anoint or remove rulers as and when it suited their purposes.

Farmers and landowners resisted them because the English imposed very high taxes on them and collected the taxes very strictly. So they lived in constant fear of failing to pay the taxes and losing their lands as a result.

Tribal people also offered resistance, because of the new rules and laws that the

English began implementing in their areas. As a result, many tribal people lost their rights over jungles and land. You will read more about this in the later years.

Many Hindus and Muslims feared that the English would destroy their religions and convert them to Christianity.

The English faced their toughest battle in 1857 when, for few months, their rule was uprooted over almost the entire northern Indian region. This revolt was started by Indian *sipahis* or soldiers, who were soon joined by royal families, landowners, farmers, tribal people and craftsmen. The royal families who joined the revolt include Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the peshwa, Tantia Tope, his general, the Begum of Awadh, and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. Hindus and Muslims fought together against their common enemy.

## The Revolt of 1857

*Place: The military cantonment at Meerut, where the British army had camped*

*Date: Sunday, May 10, 1857*

The sun was about to set when the Indian soldiers began firing their guns on their English officers. These were the same soldiers who had helped the English to conquer the kingdoms of India. They were now fed up with the behaviour of the English. They were not getting their salaries on time and they were not treated with respect in the British army. On top of this, the *sipahis* suspected that the cartridges for their new guns (rifles) were being coated with cow and pig fat to keep them dry. They felt that their religious faith was being violated. Based on this suspicion, a similar uprising had occurred at Barrackpur, near

Free Distribution by Govt. of A.P.

Kolkata in March 1857. The sense of discontent at Meerut was widespread and on this day the soldiers opened fire on their English officers. The rebellious soldiers marched towards Delhi that very night.

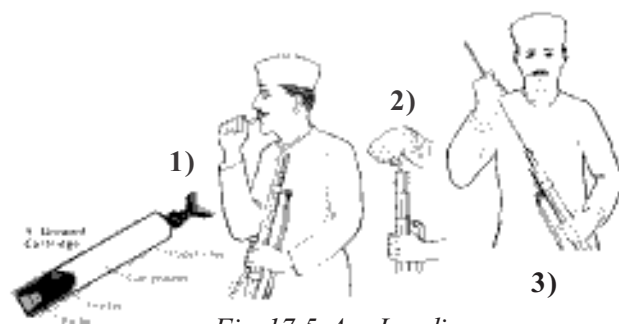


Fig 17.5 A - Loading a gun.

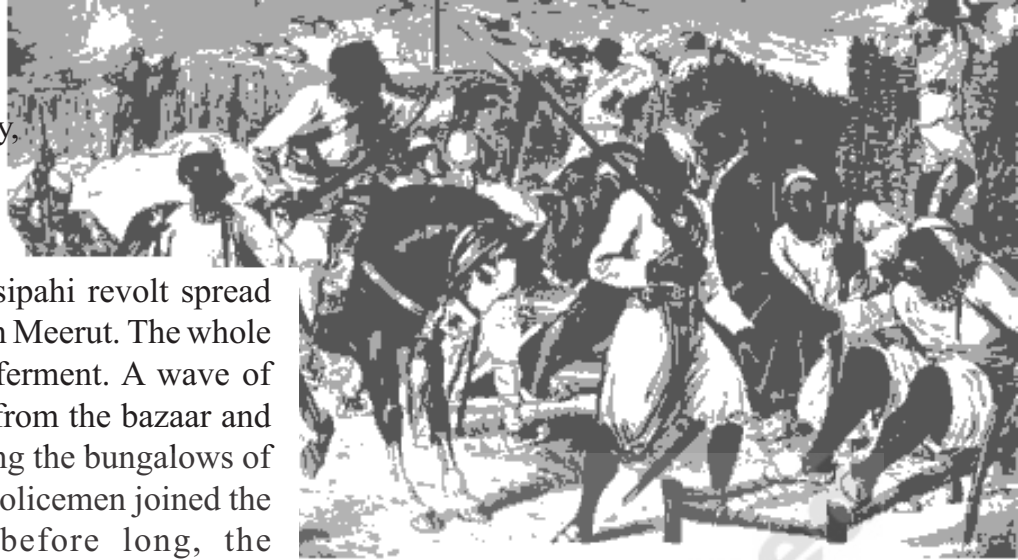
- 1) The soldier was supposed to tear open the paper case with his teeth.
- 2) He would pour the gun powder into the rifle.
- 3) He would then ram the bullet wrapped in paper into the rifle.



*Place:*

Meerut town

*Date:* Sunday  
night - Monday,  
May 10-11,  
1857

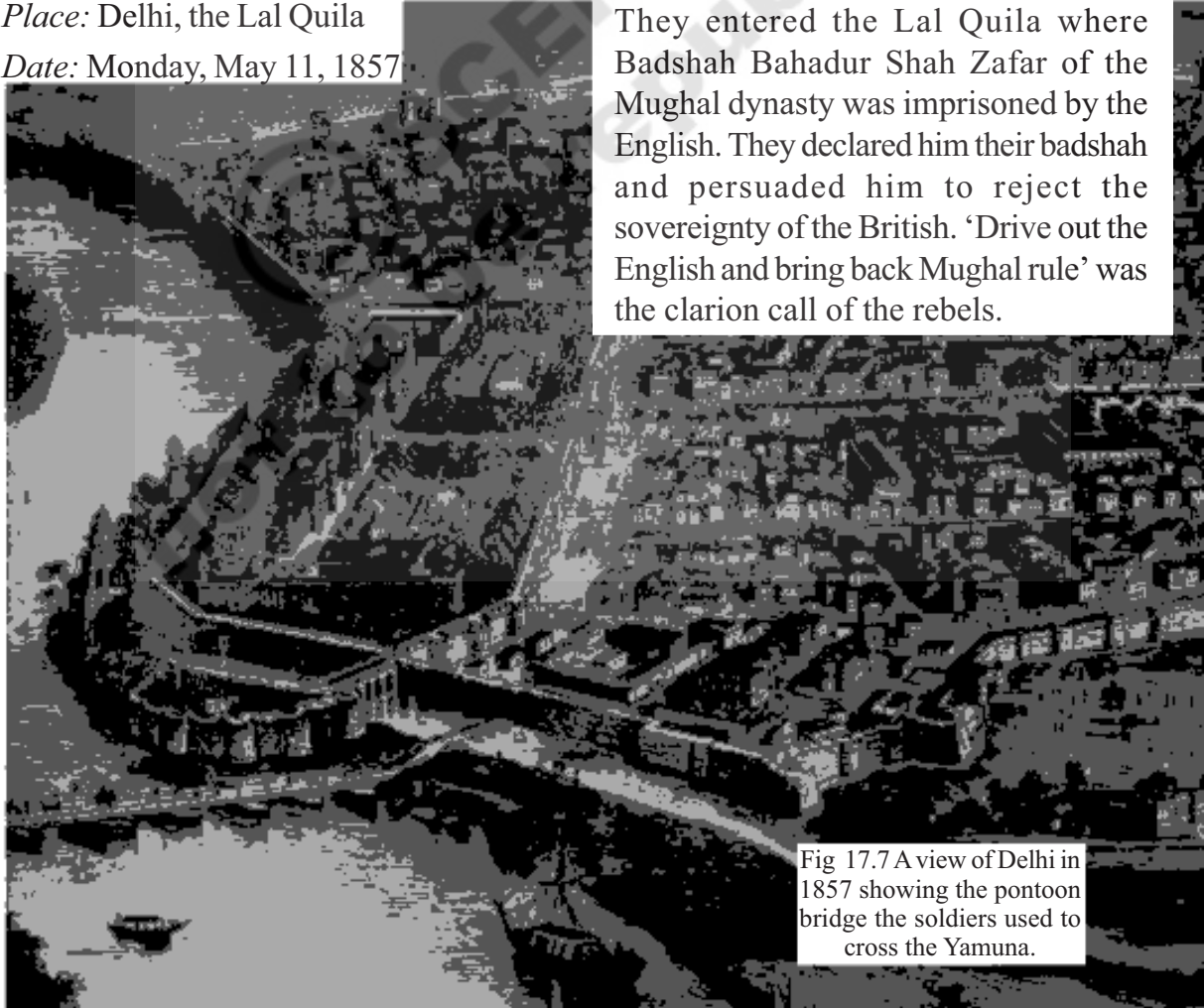


News of the sipahi revolt spread like wildfire in Meerut. The whole town was in ferment. A wave of people came from the bazaar and began attacking the bungalows of the English. Policemen joined the mobs and, before long, the bungalows and offices of the English were set afire. Many English people were killed.

*Fig 17.6 A view of Sipahi revolt at Meerut in 1857.*

*Place:* Delhi, the Lal Quila

*Date:* Monday, May 11, 1857



*Fig 17.7 A view of Delhi in 1857 showing the pontoon bridge the soldiers used to cross the Yamuna.*



## The Revolt Spreads

No sooner did this call go out, revolts against the English erupted in many places. *Sipahis* went on the rampage in the cantonments at Aligarh, Mainpuri, Bulandshahar, Attock and Mathura. The English were badly shaken. Their situation was, indeed, very delicate.



Fig 17.8 An illustration of Rani Lakshmi Bai.

There were a mere 45,000 English officers and soldiers in India. Against this, the number of Indian soldiers in their army was two lakh and thirty two thousand! It was these very *sipahis* who revolted. So who would now protect the lives and property of the English residents in the towns? The Indian sections of their army could not be

relied on. Consequently, many English soldiers were kept back to protect the English families. As a result, the revolt could not be suppressed immediately and it spread from place to place.

Many royal families, whose kingdoms had been taken away by the English, joined the revolt. Among them were the former Nawab of Awadh and the Maratha peshwa Nana Sahib. Armies of rebel *sipahis* and rulers from different corners of the country marched towards Delhi. Hope was in the air that the English would be driven away and Mughal rule and the earlier political order would be restored.



Fig 17.9 Tantia Tope

- ◆ Discuss why the idea of the Mughal empire brought the rebelling Indian people together.
- ◆ When you oppose something, you need an alternative in its place. Think of an example from your experience that brings out this need of an alternative.

## Every Village in Revolt

The flames of revolt spread from *kasba* to *kasba* and village to village in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The peasants and *zamindars* took up arms together and had the English and their officers on the run. They stopped paying taxes to the British government. They tore up railway lines, burnt down police stations, courts, post & telegraph offices and uprooted the telegraph wires. These were the new things the English had introduced in India. As defeat stared the English in their faces, the Indian people became more and more courageous in their fight against British rule.

The rebels looted the houses and burnt the documents of many moneylenders. These moneylenders had become very powerful in the villages with the help of English laws.

## The Revolt is Suppressed

Despite the widespread success of the revolt, the English slowly gained control over the situation.



Fig 17.10 Hanging the rebels.

The rebels fought bravely. But there were two major weaknesses among them. In every town or region, different groups of rebels fought separately against the English. They did not fight together. There was no combined and well-planned effort. So the English were able to tackle the rebels one by one in each area.

The rebels also faced a shortage of modern arms. The guns and cannons, cartridges and gunpowder they required were brought from outside India. Consequently, the rebels had to fight with old guns, arrows, spears and swords. How long could such weapons last in a contest against the more modern arms?

Even then, the speed with which the revolt spread frightened the English. So they behaved with great cruelty whenever they suppressed a rebel group. They killed the rebels in a most inhumane way and hanged their bodies from trees in the villages so that the village folk would ‘understand’ the consequences of revolt.

They tied some rebels to the mouths of cannons and blew them to bits. Many rebels went into hiding, moving from place to place to avoid being caught by the English. Many of them even went to places like Nepal to hide.

The English deported Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to far away Rangoon and it was there that the last Mughal emperor died. The revolt of 1857 was the biggest revolt to challenge the might of the English. After suppressing it, their hold over India became stronger and they ruled the country for the next 90 years.

◆ Choose the correct alternative:

a) The rebels of 1857 AD wanted to (restore/remove)\_\_\_\_\_ Mughal rule.

b) The weakness of the English army was that most of its soldiers were (Europeans/Indians)\_\_\_\_\_.

◆ What were the weaknesses of the rebel Indian armies?

because the English would not try to dethrone them.

In this way they established a close collaboration with the royal families of India. Similarly, the *zamindars*, too, were given many concessions and were assured that their property would be protected.

The *pundits* and *maulvis* were assured that the British government would not interfere in matters relating to Indian religions and would let the old traditions continue. There was also a promise that Indians would be included in the government. The truth is that the English had seen their Indian empire being snatched away in 1857. Now they directed their efforts towards giving all kinds of concessions to some of the elite powerful Indians, to conciliate them and ensure that they continued to support the English.

## After the Revolt

It took the English more than a year to suppress the revolt of 1857. During this period, they changed many of their policies and adopted new ones. In 1858, Queen Victoria of England made an important declaration. She said Indian kings should rule their own kingdoms without anxiety



*Fig 17.11 Bahadur Shah Zafar and his sons being arrested by Captain Hodson. After Aurangzeb there was no powerful Mughal ruler, but Mughal emperors continued to be symbolically important. When rebellion against British rule broke out in 1857, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the Mughal emperor at the time, was seen as the natural leader. Once the revolt was put down by the company, he was forced to leave the kingdom, and his sons were shot in cold blood.*

### Key words :

- |                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Royal Charter  | 5. <i>Jagir</i>    |
| 2. <i>Subedar</i> | 6. Cantonment      |
| 3. Sole right     | 7. Colonies        |
| 4. Demand         | 8. <i>Maulvies</i> |

### Improve your learning

1. Why did the European trading companies maintain armies in India? What role did these armies play in the business of the companies?
2. Why do you think the European armies were able to defeat the Indian armies in the 1700's and 1800's?
3. In 1857, who were the people of India who revolted against the English, and who were the ones who stayed away from the revolt? Explain why they acted the way they did.
4. In 1857, which soldiers felt their religious faith was being violated, and why?
5. In what ways did people revolt against the British in 1857?
6. What did the people who revolted in 1857 want to achieve?
7. In Queen Victoria's declaration of 1858, what complaints of the rebels did she try to address?
8. What are some similarities and differences between the way the Mughals and the English came to power in India?
9. Locate the sea route of Vasco da Gama from Portugal to India in the map.
10. Write a short note on the need of Unity to avert of foreign invasion.