The East India Company of the British Empire began as a trading power with the singular purpose of eliminating commercial competition in burgeoning markets, particularly those in South East Asia. The seemingly accidental evolution into a major colonial power was the result of a culmination of global and local events, technological advances and reigning political and economic ideologies.

Core Concepts/Keywords:
East India Trading Company, Colonial Governments, British Colonialism, Modern British History, Modern Indian History

Primary Source:

Citation:

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu.gate.lib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/eeb.html>

Annotation:
This document is a reply from the East India Company to the Thirteen Articles, which were a list of complaints made against the Company. The document addresses each article individually, providing the original text in the left margin adjacent to their response. The grievances listed range from frustrations with the nature of the Company's monopoly, to the corrupt practice of lending money to the king, to the representation of the British people in India. The response to each article is succinct and useful in assessing how the Company viewed itself and its role in India. Of particular interest is the Company's response to Article V, which concerns the Company's practice of stopping competing merchants from England and sending them home before reaching India. The Company quotes the legislation which gave them sole rights to trade by the government, and maintains their supremacy in the Indian trade.

Print Reference Source:

Citation:
Stern, Philip J. “English East India Company (EIC).” Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism Since 1450. 2007.

Annotation:
This encyclopedic article focuses on the growth of the East India Company. The article includes important historical figures who shaped the destiny of the Company, particularly Oliver Cromwell's involvement in the renewal of the 1657 charter which gave the Company a necessary foundation for economic success. This article also provides a useful discussion on how the cities the East India Company settled in burgeoned into major metropolitan areas, which led to the Company's control over governmental and civil administration in addition to their trading responsibilities. It concludes by emphasizing the British Government's attempts to control the Company's dealings in India, which eventually resulted in the dissolution of the East India Trading Company. This source is a thorough exploration of the people and events which impacted the Company's development and demise.

Electronic Reference Source:

Citation:

Annotation:
The article found in this online encyclopedia provides a brief overview of the history of the Company. It includes information on the circumstances which led to the Company’s creation and the functions it served thereafter. There is an interesting conclusion which delves into the problems faced by the Company in England, first as its monopoly was nearly successfully challenged in 1708, and later, when internal corruption led to the British Government’s regulations acts and eventual termination of the East India Company. While this source does provide accurate and relevant information, it does not fully impress upon the reader the impact the Company had in India, and neglects to delve into the cultural implications of the Company’s presence.

Web Sites:

Citation:

Annotation:
This site consists of a very brief chronology of the East India Company. It is divided by subject, and each page contains a paragraph on an important topic in the development of the Company. An interesting point made in the discussion of ‘factors and forts’ is that communication between London shareholders and Indian merchants was made entirely through writing, sent by ship, which made decision making a complicated process. The site is a valuable resource, as it provides links for further information within each subject area.

Citation:

Annotation:
This site is a general source of information about India, and explores both its history and present in cultural and political terms. The page which bears relevance to the topic of the East India Company provides a balanced, informative discussion of the history of the Company and how the transition from strictly business to de facto government negatively impacted the people and culture of India. The author provides a rare insight into the effects of the Company’s right to collect revenue following the Battle of Plassey, focusing on the famine and economic destruction of Bengal due to shortsighted, selfish Company policy. This page is maintained by a Professor of History at UCLA, and imparts an Eastern perspective to supplement the prolific work found from Western authors. The page also provides numerous links for further research on individuals and events that influenced the Company.

Books:

Citation:

Annotation:
This book provides a brief history of the creation, existence and collapse of the East India Company. It is an excellent source for exploring the basic workings of the East India Company and its relationship to the British government. There is a valuable analysis of the context of British politics and society which influenced the activities and responsibilities expected from the Company. The book certainly provides an instructive lesson in the inextricable link between England’s government and the Company’s fate, but fails to take into account the fullness of the Indian experience. Cultural and religious tensions, which played a major role in the position of the Company and its successes and failures, are sadly neglected in this discussion of the Company. Despite this particular shortcoming, the book is very useful in understanding why the Company came into existence at all, and how it worked and eventually buckled.

Citation:
This book explores a particular period in the Company's history and extrapolates a greater Imperial ideology to be found throughout its evolution. Dirks argues a new interpretation of the Company's rise to power, and insists the traditional view of an accidental Empire is erroneous. He includes a number of 'scandals' which occurred during the battle between Edmund Burke and Warren Hastings over the Company's past actions and future potential, and debunks some standard myths based in and around this time period. Most interestingly, Dirks recalls the story of the Black Hole of Calcutta, and explains how this crucial event which led to the Company's rise to governmental power may have in fact been wildly exaggerated or even fabricated.

Citation:

India is a nation of extraordinary diversity. The social and political context into which the British first entered greatly affected their successes and failures in business and beyond. This book examines the totality of modern Indian history in a neutral, objective narrative which provides a backdrop for the Company's place in India. In the sections dealing specifically with the East India Company, this book is unique in that it acknowledges the vulnerability of English traders and emphasizes their dependence on local rulers to ensure safety and procure trading rights. The strength of this book lies in its ability to balance western history with the Indian experience. It neither glorifies the initial cooperative nature of English and Mughal relations, nor does it vilify the Company in its final infamous stages.

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:

Citation:

Annotation:
The allure of exotic products and cultures was a major factor in the success of the Company, as British society clamored for foreign spices, expensive textiles and exciting tales from the East. This fascination, as Travers points out, was wed with a distinct notion of cultural and religious superiority on the part of the British. The usual assumption of India becoming an accidental colony does not satisfy this author. Travers claims the delay in communication between London and Bengal often led to individuals in India making decisions not sanctioned by the British Government, and were usually based on personal prejudices and desires. The discriminating nature of British ideology, particularly the inherently racist opinions about the Mughal government, led to a patriotism which demanded the forfeit of power by local rulers to the more able British Company. Travers argues this conceptualization, combined with a basic misunderstanding of local hierarchies and customs, set the stage for the Company's expansion in India.

Citation:

Annotation:
The East India Company faced a great deal of opposition as local rulers began to realize the implications of a foreign power controlling trade and government. This article discusses three major challenges to British power, and gives a compelling analysis of why the Company prevailed in each instance. Barua rejects the common belief that the local armies built by Mysore, the Marathas, and the Sikhs were ill-equipped and inherently inferior to British military. Instead, this article argues that the British enjoyed success in fighting these three powers because of their ability to adapt to and employ Indian battle strategies, particularly through the use of bribes and political manuevering, and also by virtue of their geographic location. These were key events in the history of the Company, because with each victory, the British ensured their
dominance over Indian rulers and trade markets.

Newspaper Article:


Annotation: This article frames the East India Company’s activity in the 18th century as a trading power in the first half, and military presence after 1750. Marshall reasons that a combination of the decline of the Mughal empire and the increasing drive for profit in the Company brought about this transition. This shift in interests also brought change in the function of the Company and its employees, directing more resources towards the administration of local government. As a civil administration, the Company prioritized profit and desired cultural assimilation. Many Indian (particularly religious) traditions became unacceptable to the British and they used their new power to try to eliminate them. This article is very informative and well organized, it provides a clear discussion of the reasons and consequences associated with the Company’s change from ambitious business to de facto government.

Additional Sources:


Annotation: This article provides a succinct discussion of the British East India Company from its conception in 1599 to its dissolution in 1858. An account of the Company’s basic history is highlighted by the inclusion of the political and social context which influenced the direction and position of the Company in both England and India. Iyer neglects to provide any critical analysis concerning the subject, instead, this article is a great starting point for further research. He includes interesting, relevant facts such as the origin of the word ‘thug’ from a violent gang of locals, called thuggees. This article is informative and interesting, and includes a number of vivid pictures to supplement the text.

Citation: Moir, Martin I. and Douglas M. Peers and Lynn Zastoupil, eds. J.S. Mill’s Encounter with India. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1999.

Annotation: This book is a collection of essays written about the role John Stuart Mill played in the East India Company, and the potential influence his experiences with the Company had on his philosophical work. Ten essays written by various authors combine to speculate on Mill’s opinion of the East India Company, and a riveting introduction provides the framework for the period in which Mill served the Company. The essays mirror a chronology of Mill’s life, beginning with a foundation of British philosophy and India, and then delving into Mill’s family connections with the Company and his eventual contributions and ultimate defense of the E.I.C. The book provides a view of the East India Company through the perspective of a prominent historical figure, and emphasizes how much the Company’s activities permeated British life in the 19th century.

Citation: Sharma, Sri Ram. Mughal Government and Administration. Bombay: Hind Kitabs Limited, 1951.

Annotation: This book is a comprehensive history of the Mughal Empire from 1526 to 1707. It discusses every aspect of the function of the Mughal government, including the organization of positions of power under Emperors, financial responsibilities, military power and policy, and religious overlap with state affairs. It also provides thorough explanations of the cultural and societal context into which the East India Company insinuated itself, and briefly discusses the importance of the Mughal Empire in legitimizing the Company’s presence and power in India. This work is important in any discussion of the East India Company, because it explains the administrative framework the British used to their advantage, and also provides a
foundation of knowledge in the local customs and expectations the Company would encounter throughout its reign.

Citation:
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu.gate.lib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/eeb.html>

Annotation:
This document was prepared by the Company in 1621 as a guide for policy on a range of matters. It describes the process of decision making within the Company, and the expectations for workers in both England and Indian Factories. Included in this document is a section on trade, which makes explicit the exclusion of private traders within the Indian market. This source is the very voice of the East India Company, and is a beautiful example of 17th century text, and a practical tool for understanding the policies and motivations of the Company.