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A Study of Warren Hastings: The First Governor-General of British India

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Abstract: Warren Hastings was the first Governor-General of India. During his tenure as Governor-General, Hastings implemented reforms within the East India Company, reducing a series of internal corruption issues and improving the company's administrative efficiency. Externally, he waged war against the Marathas, consolidating the East India Company's position in India. Additionally, he took a series of measures to counter the French, competing with them to solidify Britain's position in India. Finally, he actively studied Indian culture and integrated into Indian society, laying a solid foundation for British rule in India. However, the Rohilla War and the Benares Uprising that occurred during his tenure as governor, as well as the impeachment case after his retirement, also made him a highly controversial figure.

Keywords: Warren hastings; British India; Maratha war

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1. Introduction

The Indian question has long been a hot-button issue in South Asia, and the history of British India holds pivotal significance within the broader narrative of Indian history. Warren Hastings served as the first Governor-General of British India, and his policies profoundly shaped the entire colonial era. Unfortunately, domestic academic research on this governor remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on his colonial policies and the impeachment case against him. In contrast, international scholarship on Hastings is exceptionally rich, covering topics such as his biography, his relationship with the East India Company, and the impact of his impeachment trial on the British judicial system. As domestic scholarship on Indian affairs deepens, academic focus has broadened to encompass India's ethnic dynamics, caste systems, Sino-Indian interactions, and religious issues. Concurrently, British India has garnered increasing attention from scholars worldwide. Building upon this existing body of research, this paper examines the political career of Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of British India and analyzes the multifaceted impacts of his actions on the colony.

2. Warren hastings in his youth

2.1. Background

Warren Hastings was born in Oxfordshire in 1732. The Hastings name held considerable prominence in British history. In

the early 17th century, Warren Hastings' ancestors sold off their estates to defend the king, leading to the Hastings family's decline. "Warren Hastings' mother passed away just days after his birth, and his father also died six years later". Warren Hastings grew up in these circumstances, knowing little about his parents and, crucially, inheriting no property. Yet despite these hardships, he built a successful career through his own efforts [1].

Warren Hastings lived with his grandfather until age eight, then entered Westminster School, a prestigious London public school, at ten under his uncle's care. He excelled academically during his six years there, but his uncle soon passed away. His new guardian abruptly halted his education for unknown reasons, forcing the fifteen-year-old to seek employment. His new guardian, a customs official with influence in the East India Company, secured him a position as a clerk for the company. Thus began his journey to India.

Though young Warren Hastings might have led a secure life in Britain through education, his destiny took a circuitous path. His Indian voyage ultimately shaped the defining achievements of his life.

2.2. First steps in India

In 1750, Warren Hastings arrived in India as a mere clerk for a merchant. Beyond learning the intricacies of trade, he actively studied Bengali dialects, Persian, and immersed himself in local Indian culture. This set him apart from many other British arrivals in India, who sought only to extract wealth from the subcontinent for their own enjoyment back home. Warren Hastings was entirely different. He recognized that India would become his life's work, so he diligently studied local laws, culture, policies, and more. This laid the foundation for his later implementation of Orientalization policies [2].

In 1752, he was transferred from Calcutta to Casim Bazaar to learn the intricacies of trade. Casimero Bazaar was a prosperous city where he learned rapidly, mastering factory operations including collection, classification, and pricing. Due to his exceptional talent, Warren Hastings was soon promoted by the factory manager to become a member of the factory council. He subsequently held positions such as secretary and warehouse manager, an experience that undoubtedly proved invaluable for his personal growth. He could have continued learning there, but another unexpected turn of events soon unfolded.

During this period, the British did not hold a monopoly in India, facing competition from numerous other powers. The Marathas were a significant force among them. Having descended from the Western Ghats to the Indian plains in 1742, they became rulers of Bengal. In 1756, the ruler of Bengal, Aliverdi Khan, passed away. His grandson, Siraj-ud-Daulah, succeeded him. This new ruler harbored deep hostility toward the British. Seeking to subdue the British while their strength was still limited, Siraj-ud-Daulah launched an attack against them just two months after his accession. Since Kashin Bazaar lay close to his capital, many British subjects were captured, including Warren Hastings. Throughout this ordeal, Warren Hastings played a crucial role. His knowledge of local Indian dialects enabled him to secure better treatment for his companions, and he consistently served as an unofficial diplomatic representative. In October 1756, Clive's relief force rescued Warren Hastings and his party. Hastings rejoined Clive's army and assisted in the recapture of Calcutta.

Due to Warren Hastings' outstanding performance in this campaign, he quickly gained the favor of Governor Clive. Following the battle, on August 12, 1758, Warren Hastings became the British Minister to Bengal at the age of 25, marking his formal entry into the political arena.

2.3. New to the political arena

In 1760, Clive returned to his homeland, only to find the previously stabilized situation in Calcutta plunging into fresh turmoil. Clive selected Henry Vansittart as the new Governor, but Henry Vansittart proved incapable of resolving either the internal corruption within the Company or the strained relations between the Marathas and the British. Consequently, Calcutta descended into chaos during this period. Warren Hastings worked tirelessly during this time to mediate relations with the Marathas and even secured some promotions. Yet he failed to satisfy the Company's shareholders. Consequently, in 1764, facing mounting pressure and exclusion, he chose to resign and return to Britain. This marked the low point in

Warren Hastings' career. When he would eventually return to India, his exceptional qualities would inevitably lead him to achieve great things once more.

This chapter traces Warren Hastings' journey from his origins to the conclusion of his first political career. It becomes evident that despite lacking formidable connections or substantial wealth, he forged his own path in India through personal integrity and exceptional learning abilities. His experiences during this period provided him with a profound understanding of India's national conditions, laying an extraordinary foundation for his future role as Governor-General.

3. A brilliant career

3.1. Returning to India

Upon returning to England, Warren Hastings found himself in dire financial straits. For political reasons, he was unable to resume his position with the East India Company. Finally, in 1769, he gained Clive's understanding and returned to India as Governor of Madras. During his tenure in Madras, he discovered the city's commercial administration was in utter disarray. He promptly rectified these chaotic conditions, once again demonstrating his exceptional abilities.

Consequently, in 1772, he was promoted once more and appointed Governor of Bengal. His predecessor, Clive, wrote to congratulate him: "I am certain you lack nothing in the ability to fill this important office. I must add that you now have the opportunity to make yourself one of the most distinguished figures in this country".

At just 40 years old, Hastings had reached this position and earned such praise from Clive, clearly demonstrating his remarkable abilities.

During his tenure as Governor of Bengal, Hastings uncovered significant problems within the East India Company. Firstly, the Company held no administrative authority and possessed no taxing rights. Secondly, it undermined the authority of local administrative bodies by refusing to support the local government's military forces, which in turn made tax collection impossible. Hastings himself wrote in a letter: "Outside the narrow confines of Calcutta, the Governor and the Council possess virtually no power or authority whatsoever". Faced with this situation, Warren Hastings sought to implement active reforms and gained the support of the East India Company. The Company demanded that the Governor be granted full authority over the management of fiscal revenues and the administration of all provinces.

Building a system from near-ruins with almost no administrative foundation was nearly impossible. Hastings's early experiences proved invaluable. His deep understanding of Indian politics, economics, law, culture, and religion enabled him to base his reforms on the political structure of the Mughal Empire while adapting it. This new administrative system aligned with both local Indian realities and British political conventions. Building upon this foundation, he first enacted the Land Agreement to resolve local land disputes. Next, he addressed taxation issues by rectifying flaws in the existing revenue system. Subsequently, he implemented measures to weaken the power of the Nawabs, halting their tax remittances to the East India Company, thereby strengthening British control. These actions also boosted cash inflows to the Company while reducing its expenditures. The second major challenge was legal reform. Hastings recognized that no officials possessed expertise in this field, so he prioritized "preservation" over "innovation", an approach aligned with India's realities at the time and highly beneficial for East India Company rule. His third crucial initiative concerned customs duties and trade policy. Hastings abolished numerous unreasonable taxes, improved trade relations between Britain and other local regions, and stimulated commercial development in Bengal's economy.

Beyond internal challenges, Warren Hastings also addressed external threats during his tenure as Governor-General of Bengal. By 1771, the Marathas had grown sufficiently powerful to resume their incursions into northern India. In 1773, they invaded the Rohilkhand region, declaring that the next targets would be the provinces of Oudh and Bengal. Faced with this border crisis, Warren Hastings decisively allied with the Kingdom of Oudh to jointly resist the Marathas from the north. The Marathas were ultimately defeated by the combined British and Oudh forces. In September 1773, to further solidify the alliance, Hastings traveled to Benares to sign the Treaty of Benares with the King of Oudh. The primary purpose of this treaty was to ally with Oudh and prevent another Maratha invasion. However, conflict soon erupted

between Oudh and the Rohillas. This brought the Rohilla War to Bengal, compelling Hastings to dispatch troops to aid the Oudh. This war was one of bullying the weak, resulting in Oudh's occupation of Rohilla territories and the consolidation of British border security. However, the unjust nature of this conflict led to much controversy surrounding Hastings himself [3].

Overall, during his tenure as Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings achieved remarkable success in domestic governance. He stabilized the Company's revenue streams while simultaneously transforming its role, expanding its administrative authority and imposing greater obligations upon it. These accomplishments were profoundly linked to Hastings' personal character, integrity, and capabilities. We can observe that Hastings viewed all events in India with an impartial eye, actively sought to understand every aspect of the subcontinent, and based on this foundation formulated a series of policies. This approach solidified the East India Company's rule. Although some of his actions during the Rohilla War affected his reputation, he did hesitate over whether to aid the Oudh government in that conflict, and Britain ultimately gained benefits from the war. During his tenure as Governor of Bengal, his actions were methodical and well-organized, enabling him to implement appropriate measures based on actual circumstances. This earned him recognition from both the British government and the East India Company, marking the pinnacle of his career.

3.2. Preferment to governor

Beginning in 1769, the East India Company's own mismanagement led to a rapid financial crisis. To avoid bankruptcy, the company was forced to seek government bailouts, which provided the British government with an opportunity to intervene in its affairs. In 1773, the British government enacted the Control Act, which stipulated that the East India Company's actions would be subject to restrictions imposed by the British government and the Crown. It also established a new government for Bengal, constrained by the Crown, composed of a Governor and four Council members. This legislation profoundly impacted Warren Hastings' entire administrative career. Particularly troublesome were the four council members stipulated by the Act, whose interference proved immeasurably disruptive to Hastings.

A key reason Hastings was selected as Governor-General was his distinguished record during his earlier tenure in India. Clive might have been a more suitable candidate, but his poor health at the time allowed Hastings to become India's first Governor-General. The remaining four Council members were appointed by the Crown: George Manson, John Clavering, Bowring, and Philip Francis. In 1774, these four council members arrived in Calcutta and formally confronted Hastings. Philip Francis was an exceptionally ambitious figure, eager to overthrow Hastings to advance his own ambitions in India. His feud with Warren Hastings persisted until their deaths. Thus, Francis, Manson, and Clavering formed a faction that created significant obstacles for Hastings's administration. The trio united to oppose Hastings's policies, leveling accusations against his conduct during the Rohilla War and initiating impeachment proceedings against Warren Hastings. Hastings fought relentlessly against them, ultimately securing victory and solidifying his position as Governor-General.

3.3. First Maratha war

In 1775, internal strife once again erupted within the Maratha Empire. The British in Bombay received a plea for assistance from Ragunath Rao, an opponent of the Maratha government. Having failed in his rebellion, he sought help from the British. Meanwhile, the British in Bombay desired to acquire certain coastal territories adjacent to Bombay promised by Ragunath Rao. Thus, without the Governor's approval, the Bombay government signed the Treaty of Surat with Ragunath Rao. Under this treaty, the British dispatched a 2,500 strong army to support Ragunath Rao and achieved victory in battles against the Marathas in the Pune region. Upon reaching the Council in Calcutta, this decision drew opposition from the majority faction. Only Hastings advocated granting the Bombay government some discretionary authority. In 1776, Calcutta dispatched representatives to sign the Treaty of Pundar with the Pune government. However, this treaty satisfied neither the Pune government nor the Bombay government, rendering it effectively void. The conflict between the British and the Marathas persisted.

In 1778, French overtures to the Pune government prompted the Bombay government to fear French intervention. Consequently, the Bombay government proactively resumed hostilities, launching a war against Pune. Hastings observed

that the Bombay government itself was in disarray, leading him to view the prospects of this war unfavorably. Hastings proposed military assistance to the Bombay government, but Francis and others vehemently opposed the idea, arguing that "the best defense is to concentrate military forces within the borders and adopt a strictly defensive posture. He also felt no obligation to defend other governorates: "They should resolve their own problems". Hastings, however, resolutely pursued his aid plan. One hundred thousand rupees were allocated, and an army of 6,000 men was dispatched to Bombay. In January 1779, British forces suffered defeat in the war against the Marathas and signed the Treaty of Wadugon, stipulating that "all territories seized by the Bombay government since 1773 should be returned to Pune". Hastings recognized this as an affront to British honor and immediately repudiated the treaty, declaring, "The terms of the treaty fill me with shame". Simultaneously, he reorganized his forces to wage war against Pune. Ultimately, the British achieved a decisive victory and concluded the Treaty of Sarbai in 1783, which restored the pre-war status quo between the British and the Pune region.

Warren Hastings' most significant contribution during this conflict was his strategic vision. He clearly recognized the disarray within the Bombay government, French interference, and the Marathas' formidable strength. Amidst these circumstances, he resolutely overruled dissent to support Bombay, significantly restoring British prestige in India. This demonstrates his profound sense of responsibility as Governor-General.

3.4. Kanatek War

Following the conclusion of the First Maratha War, the British soon faced a new threat from Mysore. In July 1780, Hyder, ruler of Mysore, launched an attack on the Carnatic plains. Unable to repel the assault, the Madras Council sought assistance from Calcutta. Hastings decisively resolved: "He proposed dispatching Sir Erye Coote to the Carnatic region to assume command of the army, accompanied by 150,000 rupees and a contingent of troops, and to immediately present an offer of peace and alliance to the Marathas". This proposal faced swift opposition from other council members, but Hastings overruled dissent and resolved to send reinforcements. Additionally, he prepared transport ships to support Madras. In 1781, Coote's forces inflicted a crushing defeat on Hyder. Hyder died of cancer in 1782, and his son Tipu succeeded him, continuing the war against the British. In 1783, British commander Cutter also passed away. After prolonged stalemate and warfare, both sides signed the Treaty of Mangalore in 1784. The treaty stipulated: "Both parties shall restore conquered territories to each other, release over a thousand captured British subjects, preserve Mysore's sphere of influence, and recognize Carnatic as belonging to Mysore". Warren Hastings was deeply dissatisfied with the loss of Carnatic, but the treaty had been signed, and Hastings could do nothing about it. A brief peace returned to North India.

Hastings actively assumed responsibility during the Carnatic War. Despite opposition from the majority, he personally led troops and supplies to conduct the relief mission. He deeply understood Madras's strategic importance to British India and skillfully utilized his intelligence to resolve the crisis.

3.5. Benares uprising

In 1780, due to the outbreak of the Carnatic War and the East India Company's financial shortfall, the Bengal government demanded that Chait Singh, ruler of Benares, pay a "special war contribution" of 500,000 rupees and provide 2,000 cavalrymen for British use. This demand far exceeded the scope of the existing agreement between Britain and Benares. Chait Singh refused to accept these two new obligations imposed by Hastings. Consequently, Hastings traveled to Benares to negotiate with Chait Singh, ultimately triggering the Benares Uprising. This incident became a major political stain on Hastings's record.

In 1784, Pitt's India Act was passed. This legislation supplemented the Regulation Act, stipulating: "The lands of Bengal shall be restored to their hereditary proprietors as estates; a policy of non-intervention shall be adopted as the framework for foreign relations; and plans for conquest shall be prohibited". Furthermore, the Act mandated the complete dismantling of the East India Company's political and commercial authority, transferring these powers to the Crown [4]. Hastings was profoundly disappointed by the bill's provisions, perceiving it as a stripping away of most of his authority

as Governor-General. Consequently, he promptly tendered his resignation to the Company. In 1785, he embarked on his journey back to Britain, bringing his political career to an end.

4. Life in old age

4.1. Facing impeachment

From the moment Hastings assumed the governorship, he became embroiled in a series of political struggles and scandals. Consequently, he made numerous enemies during his tenure in India. Upon his return to Britain, these adversaries immediately launched impeachment proceedings against Hastings for his actions in the colony. The most impeachable offenses included Hastings' involvement in the Rohilla War, the Benares Rebellion, and the extortion of the Queen of Oudh. On January 24, 1786, during a parliamentary session, members of Parliament brought charges against Hastings. His political opponents leveled a total of 22 accusations against him [5]. The Benares Rebellion and extortion of Queen Awadh stemmed from severe resource shortages in Calcutta following the Maratha and Carnatic Wars. Hastings extorted wealth from local Indian princes, though he used these funds for military expenditures. Nevertheless, his opponents exploited these actions to build their case. Nevertheless, Hastings' actions garnered significant support, and the impeachment proceedings finally concluded in 1795 with Hastings being acquitted [6].

This impeachment proved a devastating blow to Hastings. He could not comprehend how his actions, undertaken for Britain's advancement, could be criticized as autocratic and undemocratic. Moreover, the impeachment proceedings lasted an extraordinary nine years, an exceptionally rare occurrence in British judicial history. This prolonged ordeal prompted profound reflection on Britain's judicial processes and ultimately spurred reforms within the British legal system.

4.2. Intangible heritage

During his tenure in India, Warren Hastings not only achieved significant political accomplishments but also left behind a wealth of invaluable cultural legacies. He placed great importance on Indian culture, and in 1776, he commissioned scholars to compile the Digest of Hindu Laws [7]. In 1781, he invested substantial funds to establish the "Muslim College", an institution dedicated to the study of various scientific disciplines taught by Muslim professors, holding significant historical importance. Beyond his direct involvement in these cultural initiatives, he actively encouraged distinguished British scholars to come to India, translate Indian classical texts, and gain a comprehensive understanding of Indian culture. It can be said that his series of measures laid a solid cultural foundation for Britain's subsequent rule over India.

4.3. Fall

In 1818, Hastings ended his life at Dalesford in Oxfordshire, the land where his ancestors had lived for generations.

5. Conclusion

Looking back on Hastings' life, it is evident that he rose to become the first Governor-General of India through his own intelligence and character, despite having no background to rely on. During his tenure as Governor-General, his Orientalist policies, administrative reforms, foreign wars, and domestic reforms effectively consolidated Britain's position in India. Undeniably, however, his imperialist and authoritarian tendencies were evident in the Rohilla Wars and the Benares Rebellion, and he was criticized by his political opponents as a tyrant of India. Regardless, his profound influence as India's first Governor-General laid the groundwork for British India.

Understanding Warren Hastings' life helps us grasp the formation and development of British India. His era coincided with the period when the government and the Crown began to gradually intervene in Indian affairs. Therefore, correctly understanding this governor and his actions during his tenure can enrich our understanding of British India.

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