

HISTORY OF INDIA (c. 1757-1947 CE)

Unit-II

[c] Lord Wellesley and the Policy of Subsidiary Alliance

1. Historical Background: India on the Eve of Wellesley

- The period after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and Battle of Buxar (1764) witnessed a steady increase in the political and military power of the English East India Company (EIC).
- By the late eighteenth century, however, the Company still faced powerful Indian states and European rivals, especially the French, who remained an important strategic concern.
- The decline of Mughal authority had produced a fragmented political order in which regional powers – Marathas, Mysore, Hyderabad, Awadh and others – pursued their own interests.
- The Anglo-Mysore Wars and Anglo-Maratha conflicts had already shown that the Company needed to manage both Indian rivals and European intervention.
- The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars intensified British fears that France might establish influence in India through alliances with Indian rulers.
- Tipu Sultan of Mysore maintained contacts with the French and attempted to secure external support against the British; this strengthened the East India Company's justification for an aggressive diplomatic strategy.
- The Maratha Confederacy remained a major military and political force, though internal rivalries weakened collective Maratha power.
- The Nizam of Hyderabad had become increasingly dependent on European-trained troops and faced the danger of French influence within his military establishment.
- Wellesley therefore inherited a political environment in which security, diplomacy, military preparedness and territorial expansion were closely connected.

2. Lord Wellesley: Position, Personality and Objectives

- Richard Colley Wellesley became Governor-General of Bengal in 1798 and remained in office until 1805.
- He believed that the Company should cease to be merely one power among many and should become the dominant political authority in India.
- His policy is often associated with an assertive form of imperial expansion: diplomacy, military force and treaty arrangements were combined to establish British paramountcy.
- The immediate strategic objective was to prevent French influence in Indian politics and to deny rival states the possibility of forming anti-British coalitions.

- The wider objective was to reduce the independence of Indian states by bringing their external relations and military arrangements under British control.
- Wellesley preferred indirect control where possible because it was often cheaper and politically easier than direct annexation.

3. Meaning of the Subsidiary Alliance

- A Subsidiary Alliance was a political and military arrangement between the EIC and an Indian ruler under which the British undertook to protect the ruler against external and, in practice, internal threats, while the ruler accepted substantial restrictions on sovereignty.
- The central idea was “security in return for dependence”: the Indian ruler retained the appearance of internal authority but surrendered important elements of independent statecraft.
- The British maintained a permanent force within or near the allied state. The cost of this force was generally charged to the ruler, either through an annual subsidy or through the assignment/cise of territory whose revenues financed the troops.
- The system therefore created a form of indirect rule before formal annexation became necessary.
- It also enabled the Company to place political pressure on allied states while avoiding the administrative costs of governing all of their territories directly.

4. Main Provisions / Terms of the Subsidiary Alliance

Provision	Meaning / Effect
Permanent British force	The ruler accepted the stationing of a British subsidiary force within or near his territory for defence.
Payment of subsidy	The ruler had to meet the expenses of the subsidiary force. Failure to make payment could lead to the assignment or cession of territory.
Restriction on foreign relations	The allied ruler could not enter into negotiations, alliances or wars with other powers without British approval.
British Resident	A British Resident was stationed at the ruler’s court to supervise political relations and communicate the Governor-General’s policy.
Exclusion of Europeans	The ruler generally agreed not to employ Europeans, especially military personnel from rival European powers, without British consent.

British protection	The Company promised to defend the ruler and his territories against external aggression and to support the existing ruling house.
Reduction of independent military capacity	The ruler's dependence on the British force weakened his need – and ability – to maintain an independent army capable of challenging the Company.
No reciprocal equality	Although described as an alliance, the relationship was unequal: British military protection was exchanged for restrictions that substantially reduced the ruler's sovereignty.

5. Why Did Indian Rulers Accept the Alliance?

- Military insecurity: rulers faced powerful neighbours, internal factionalism, succession disputes and unstable regional politics.
- Fear of Maratha power: Hyderabad and other states often viewed Maratha expansion as a serious threat.
- Fear of French influence: some Indian rulers employed or contemplated European officers to modernize their armies; the British presented this as a security threat and offered their own protection as an alternative.
- Need to preserve dynasties: an alliance could protect a ruling family from immediate military destruction or deposition.
- Financial and military pressures: maintaining a large independent army was expensive, and some rulers preferred British protection to the uncertainties of prolonged warfare.
- Short-term political calculation: rulers sometimes accepted restrictions in order to defeat a more immediate Indian rival, even though the arrangement weakened their long-term sovereignty.

6. Why Did the British Promote It?

- To create a ring of dependent states around the Company's core territories.
- To prevent Indian rulers from forming anti-British alliances with one another.
- To exclude French advisers and military personnel from strategic Indian states.
- To obtain strategic military bases and secure lines of communication.
- To shift the financial burden of British troops onto Indian rulers.
- To control the foreign policy of Indian states without immediately annexing all their territories.

- To isolate major powers—especially Mysore, Hyderabad and the Maratha states—and deal with them one at a time.

7. Major Applications of the Subsidiary Alliance System

7.1 Hyderabad: The First Major Success

- The Nizam of Hyderabad was one of the earliest and most important rulers to enter into Wellesley's system.
- In 1798, the Nizam agreed to a Subsidiary Alliance and accepted a British force in place of his French-trained contingent.
- The immediate British objective was to eliminate French influence from the Nizam's army and diplomatic sphere.
- The Nizam's acceptance increased British influence in the Deccan and weakened one of the most important possible centres of French power in India.
- In 1800, further arrangements led to the cession of territory for the maintenance of the subsidiary force, making the financial basis of the alliance more secure.
- Historical significance: Hyderabad became a model of how the British could obtain strategic influence without direct annexation.

7.2 Mysore after the Fall of Tipu Sultan

- The Fourth Anglo-Mysore War (1799) ended with the defeat and death of Tipu Sultan and the capture of Srirangapatna by the British-led forces.
- The British restored the Wadiyar dynasty in a reduced Mysore state and concluded a subsidiary arrangement with the restored ruler.
- The new arrangement placed Mysore under British strategic influence while retaining a native ruling house.
- Mysore thus illustrates how military conquest could be followed by indirect rule through a subsidiary relationship.

7.3 Awadh (Oudh), 1801

- Awadh was strategically important because of its location near Bengal and the North Indian frontier.
- Under the arrangement of 1801, the Nawab ceded substantial territory to the Company in lieu of the financial burden of maintaining British troops.
- The ceded territories strengthened British control over the Gangetic region and improved strategic communications.

- The arrangement sharply reduced the Nawab's effective independence while leaving him as the formal ruler of the remaining state.
- Awadh later became the site of direct annexation in 1856 under a different policy, demonstrating that indirect dependence could precede eventual annexation.

7.4 The Peshwa and the Treaty of Bassein, 1802

- The Maratha Confederacy was not a centralized state but a federation of powerful chiefs, including the Peshwa at Poona, the Scindias, Holkars and Bhonsles.
- Internal Maratha rivalry culminated in the defeat of Peshwa Baji Rao II by Yashwantrao Holkar in 1802.
- Seeking restoration to Poona, the Peshwa accepted British protection through the Treaty of Bassein (31 December 1802).
- The treaty required the Peshwa to accept a subsidiary force and to restrict his independent dealings with other powers.
- The British gained a decisive opening into Maratha politics and used the treaty as the basis for further military intervention.
- The settlement provoked opposition from other Maratha chiefs and contributed directly to the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803–1805).

7.5 Scindia and Bhonsle; the Second Anglo-Maratha War

- Daulat Rao Scindia and Raghuji II Bhonsle resisted the consequences of the Treaty of Bassein and confronted the British.
- British victories in 1803, including the battles of Assaye and Argaon and the capture of Delhi, strengthened Company power in central and northern India.
- Treaties with the defeated Maratha chiefs expanded British political influence and territorial control.
- Yashwantrao Holkar remained outside the immediate subsidiary framework and continued resistance, showing that the system did not automatically secure universal acceptance.
- The Maratha experience demonstrates that the Subsidiary Alliance was both a diplomatic device and a trigger for military expansion when rulers resisted British demands.

8. Chronology for Quick Revision

Year	Event / Significance
1798	Wellesley becomes Governor-General; alliance with the Nizam of Hyderabad; French military influence at Hyderabad is removed.

1799	Fourth Anglo-Mysore War; Tipu Sultan is defeated and killed; Mysore is reorganized under British influence.
1800	Further Hyderabad settlement; territory is assigned for the maintenance of the subsidiary force.
1801	Awadh cedes large territories to the Company in connection with the subsidiary system.
1802	Peshwa Baji Rao II signs the Treaty of Bassein (31 December).
1803–1805	Second Anglo-Maratha War; British power expands across major parts of central and northern India.
1805	Wellesley leaves India. His successor, Lord Cornwallis, adopts a more cautious tone, though British paramountcy continues to develop.

9. Relationship between the Subsidiary Alliance and British Expansion

- The policy converted military superiority into political dependence without requiring immediate annexation.
- A state under alliance remained formally sovereign but lost control over foreign policy, military diplomacy and, increasingly, financial resources.
- British Residents became important instruments of indirect political supervision.
- Cession of territory for the maintenance of troops enlarged Company possessions whenever allied rulers could not or would not pay subsidies.
- The system reduced the possibility of coordinated resistance because individual rulers became dependent on British protection against their neighbours.
- It helped construct a hierarchy of power in which the East India Company moved from being a regional territorial power to a paramount political authority.

10. Immediate Consequences for Indian States

- Loss of diplomatic autonomy: allied rulers could no longer freely conduct foreign relations.
- Loss of military autonomy: dependence on British forces reduced the ruler's capacity to maintain an independent strategic policy.
- Economic burden: subsidies or territorial cessions placed substantial pressure on state finances.
- Political intervention: British Residents could influence appointments, succession questions and court politics, even when the treaty did not explicitly transfer internal sovereignty.

- Factional politics: groups at court could appeal to the British, increasing the Company's leverage over internal affairs.
- Erosion of prestige: rulers who relied on British arms increasingly appeared subordinate to the Company.

11. Consequences for the East India Company

- Strategic advantage: British troops were stationed at key points across India.
- Reduction of French influence: Indian states became less available as bases for French diplomacy and military organization.
- Financial benefit: Indian rulers bore much of the cost of the subsidiary forces.
- Territorial growth: inability or unwillingness to meet financial obligations could result in territorial assignment or cession.
- Diplomatic supremacy: the Company acquired control over the external relations of several major Indian states.
- Military mobility: subsidiary forces could be used in wider Company campaigns, including conflicts far beyond the territory of the allied ruler.

12. Was the Subsidiary Alliance Really an "Alliance"?

- The word "alliance" suggests partnership between roughly equal powers, but the relationship was fundamentally unequal.
- The British retained freedom of strategic action while the Indian ruler accepted significant restrictions.
- Protection was not purely altruistic: the Company gained bases, revenue, diplomatic control and strategic security in return.
- The ruler often retained internal authority, titles and court institutions, which made indirect rule less disruptive than outright annexation.
- For this reason, historians often interpret the system as an instrument of political subordination and imperial expansion rather than a normal alliance among sovereign equals.

13. Wellesley's Policy Compared with Earlier British Approaches

- Earlier Company diplomacy often relied more heavily on balancing Indian powers, limited treaty commitments and selective military intervention.
- Wellesley pursued a more systematic policy of making Indian states dependent on British military protection.

- The policy therefore represented a transition from coexistence and opportunistic intervention toward a more explicit conception of British paramountcy.
- However, the policy should not be viewed as completely new: earlier arrangements had contained elements of subsidiary troops, protected states and British political influence.
- Wellesley's distinctive contribution was to organize these elements into a deliberate and expansive strategic system.

14. Strengths of the Policy from the British Point of View

- It was comparatively economical because allied rulers paid for the military protection they received.
- It prevented rival European powers from establishing military and diplomatic networks in important Indian states.
- It allowed the British to interfere in regional politics without assuming the full costs of direct administration.
- It isolated individual Indian states, making combined resistance more difficult.
- It provided British forces with strategic bases and greater operational flexibility.

15. Weaknesses and Limits of the Policy

- The system generated resentment because Indian rulers saw their sovereignty and prestige being reduced.
- Subsidiary forces could become financially burdensome, especially for states with weak revenue systems.
- British intervention in court politics could deepen instability rather than eliminate it.
- Some rulers resisted the system, and resistance could lead to expensive wars, as in the Maratha case.
- The rapid pace of Wellesley's expansion alarmed policymakers in Britain, contributing to criticism of his financial and military expenditure.
- The policy could blur the boundary between "protection" and control, making British promises of non-interference difficult to reconcile with actual political practice.

16. Critical Historical Assessment

- Imperialist interpretation: the policy is seen as an effective instrument for extending British power and creating an Indian political order dominated by the Company.
- Strategic interpretation: the policy can also be understood as a response to the global Anglo-French rivalry and fears of French intervention in India.

- Indian-state perspective: acceptance of the system often reflected difficult choices made by rulers facing immediate military and political threats.
- Long-term interpretation: subsidiary dependence weakened the autonomy of Indian states and prepared the ground for deeper British intervention in the nineteenth century.
- Balanced conclusion: Wellesley's policy cannot be explained by territorial greed alone; security, European rivalry, regional politics and imperial ambitions reinforced one another.

17. Key Terms to Remember

Term	Meaning
Subsidiary Alliance	A treaty system of British military protection combined with restrictions on an Indian ruler's sovereignty.
Subsidiary Force	The British troops maintained for the protection of an allied state, whose cost was borne by that state.
British Resident	An official stationed at the court of an Indian ruler to represent and advance British political interests.
Paramountcy	The claim that the British power was the supreme political authority over other states in India.
Treaty of Bassein	The 1802 treaty between the Peshwa Baji Rao II and the British that brought the Peshwa into the subsidiary system and helped trigger the Second Anglo-Maratha War.
Cession of territory	Transfer of territory to the Company, often used to meet the cost of subsidiary troops.
Indirect rule	Control exercised through existing rulers and institutions rather than through direct annexation and administration.