

The Accidental Empire

How the English conquered Bengal not with the sword, but with the ledger.

Criminological Insights By Dr. Mridul Srivastava

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The Rise of British Sovereignty in Bengal (1757–1787)

MILESTONES OF CONQUEST

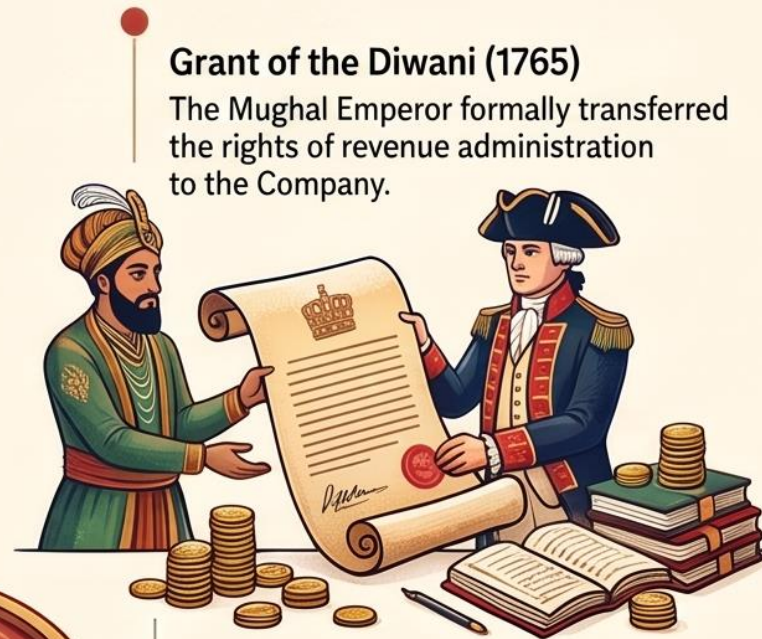


The Battle of Plassey (June 23, 1757)

Lord Clive's victory secured the EIC's territorial dominance and military supremacy in Bengal.



A process where British military power superseded native authority while maintaining Mughal forms.



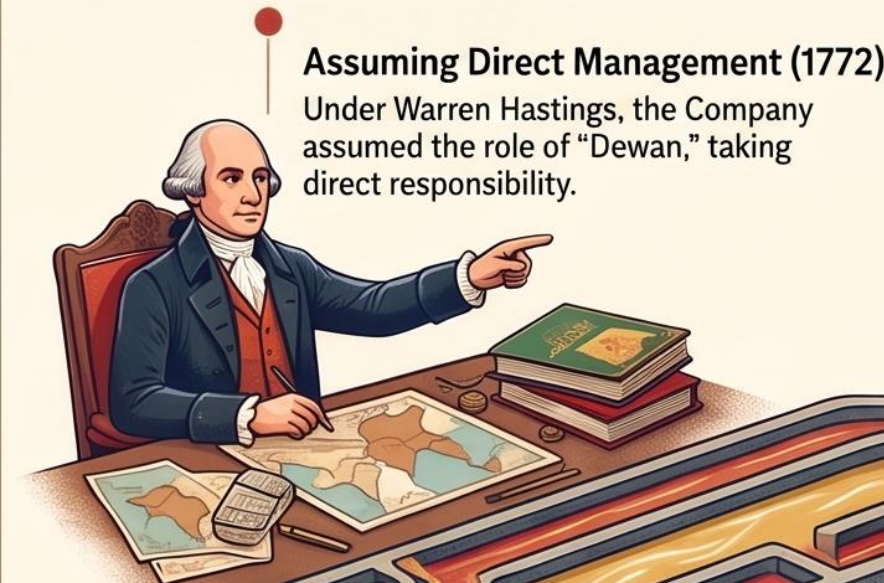
Grant of the Diwani (1765)

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EVOLUTION OF REVENUE ADMINISTRATION



Assuming Direct Management (1772)

Under Warren Hastings, the Company assumed the role of "Dewan," taking direct responsibility.



Establishment of British Collectors

Native agents were replaced by British Collectors to oversee revenue and local administration.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE EVOLUTION

Supreme Authority

Intermediate Authority

Subordinate Authority



The Myth of 1757

THE ILLUSION

The Popular Belief: Plassey was a decisive military victory that secured Bengal for England.

"Plassey cannot rank as a great military achievement... it did not correspond with any bold design framed by the genius of Clive."

THE REALITY

The True Engine of Conquest:
The English occupation was justified entirely on their rights as revenue officials under the Mughal Emperors.

The history of revenue administration is thus the backbone of the history of the English occupation of Bengal.

Reluctant Rulers

The East India Company was actively averse to the acquisition of territory, which they **viewed as a threat to their commercial bottom line**.

**Commercial
Privilege
& Profit**

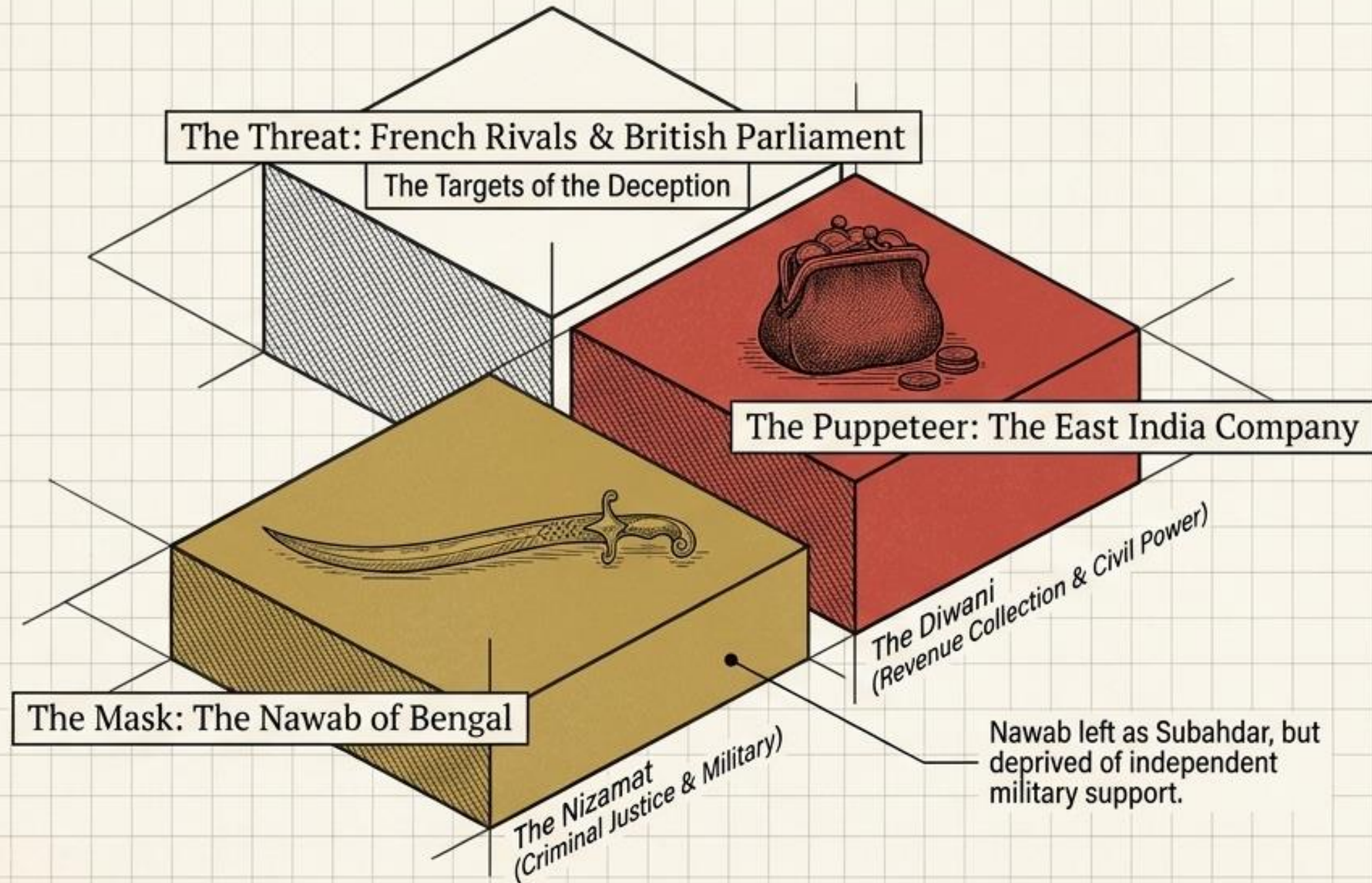


**Territorial
Sovereignty**

"Our business is trade, it is not political for us to be encumbered with much territory."
- **Court of Directors (1719)**

The Strategy: The Company sought to act as Zamindar (revenue collector)—a civilian role that funded trade and defense without claiming formal sovereign power.

Clive's 'Masked System' (1765)



Mechanism:

The EIC acquires the Diwani (the purse) but leaves the Nizamat (the sword) to the Nawab.

The Purpose:

To avoid the 'interference or jealousy' of foreign powers and to prevent the British Crown from stepping in to regulate the EIC's newly won, massive wealth. The system obviated jealousy and answered British constitutional axioms against direct acquisition of sovereignty.

The Broken Inheritance

What the British thought they were managing vs. what actually existed.

The Mughal Ideal (Akbar & Todar Mal)		The 18th Century Reality	
1	System: <i>Tumar Jama</i> (The Standard Rent-Roll).	1	System: Arbitrary exactions and 'military rabble.'
2	Assessment: Based on direct, measured agricultural yield.	2	Assessment: Conjectural valuations heavily inflated by corrupt <i>Zamindars</i> and <i>Faujders</i> .
3	Objective: Equitable taxation protecting the cultivator.	3	Reality: A terror-stricken peasantry; troops paid by whatever they could wring from the cultivators.

Takeaway: The British assumed they were inheriting a functional financial machine; they instead found a collapsed state requiring total administrative reconstruction.

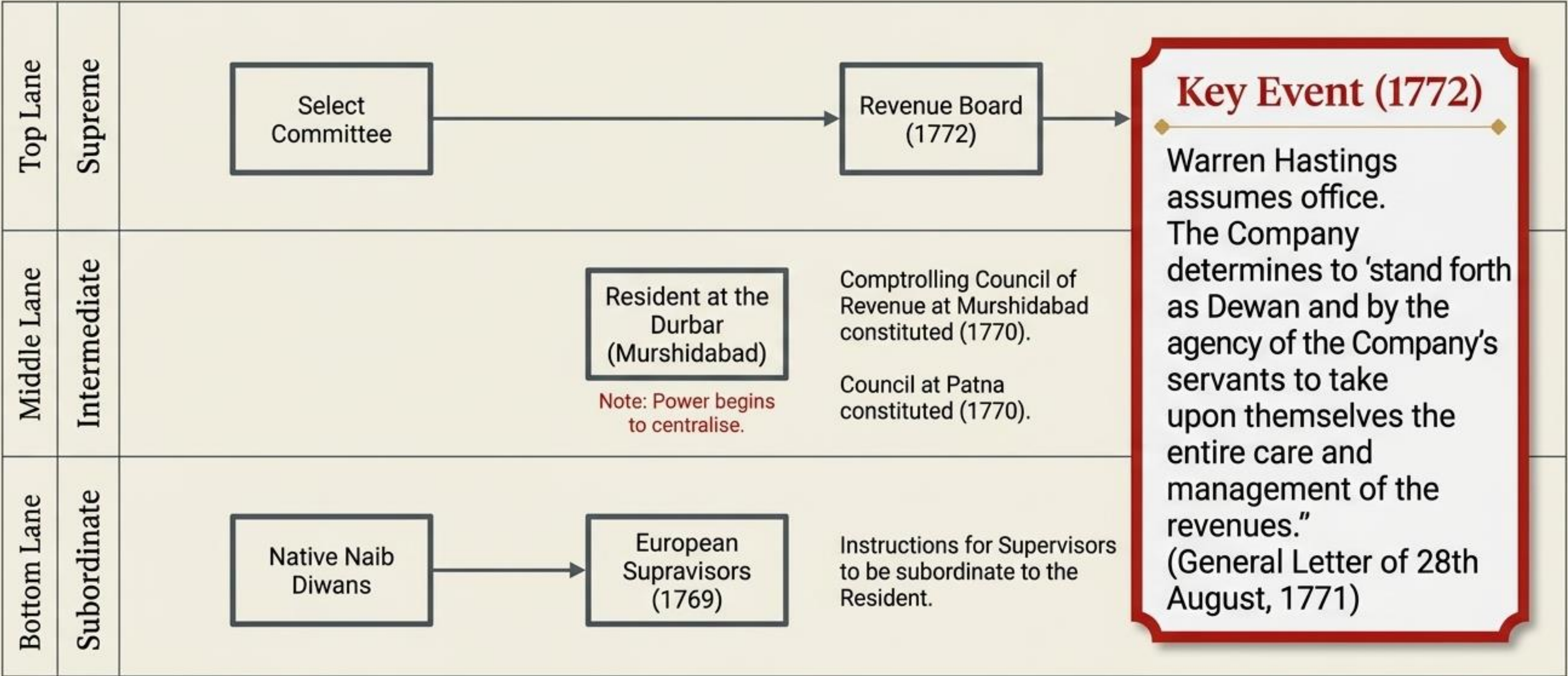
The Competitors for Sovereignty (1765)

The Governance Triad

 The English Crown & Parliament	 The East India Company (EIC)	 The Nawab of Bengal
• Legal Claim: Absolute sovereignty over any conquests made by British subjects. • Primary Motivation: National prestige; controlling the EIC's monopoly.	• Legal Claim: Operating as Diwan under the Mughal Emperor's grant. • Primary Motivation: Protecting commercial dividends; avoiding Crown interference.	• Legal Claim: The legitimate Subahdar (Governor) of the Mughal Empire. • Actual Power: Stripped of military supremacy and revenue; dependent on the EIC.

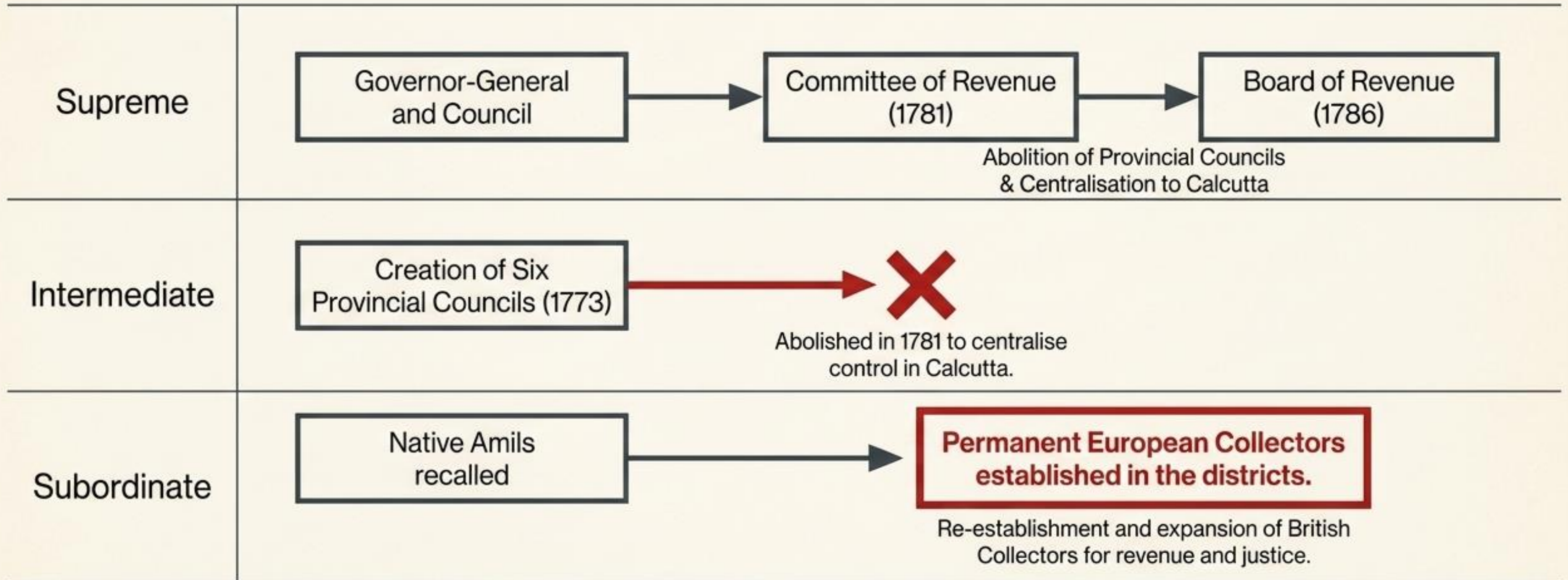
Extruding Sovereignty, Phase I (1769–1772)

The reluctant shift from native oversight to direct European intervention.



Extruding Sovereignty, Phase II (1773–1787)

The permanent establishment of the British civil service.



The Result: By 1787, justice and revenue are entirely in the hands of British Collectors. The Native administration has been methodically overwritten by British bureaucracy.

The Phantom Nawab

Warren Hastings viewed the Nawab's retained sovereignty as an illusion, treating the native ruler as an EIC ward. Hastings claimed to act *in loco parentis* for the Nazim, disregarding the Nawab's authority.



Hastings in his own words (1775):

"All the act of policy cannot conceal the power by which these provinces are ruled... the Nawab is a mere pageant without so much as the pageant of authority."

Proceedings of Council

The Paradox: Hastings knew the British were the true sovereigns, but continued the fiction to prevent foreign powers from legally challenging the Company's monopoly.

The Constitutional Collision (1775)

The Case:

Roy Radha Churn, representing the Nawab, is indicted. The Council claims he has diplomatic immunity because the Nawab is a Sovereign Prince. This occurs within the context of trials for conspiracy against Warren Hastings and Richard Barwell.

The Council's Argument

The Nawab holds the rights of a Subadar. Prosecuting his ministers violates the sovereignty of the Mughal state and the treaties that protect the Company from French interference.

Draws from the letter to Sir Elijah Impey claiming rights, privileges, and immunities.



The Counsel's Rebuttal

The Nawab has no troops, no control over justice, and is a pensioner of the EIC. He is a "mere pageant" and his sovereignty is a "delusion."

Mr. Farrer's and Mr. Newman's

The Verdict on Sovereignty

The Ruling: The Supreme Court Judges unanimously reject the Nawab's sovereignty.

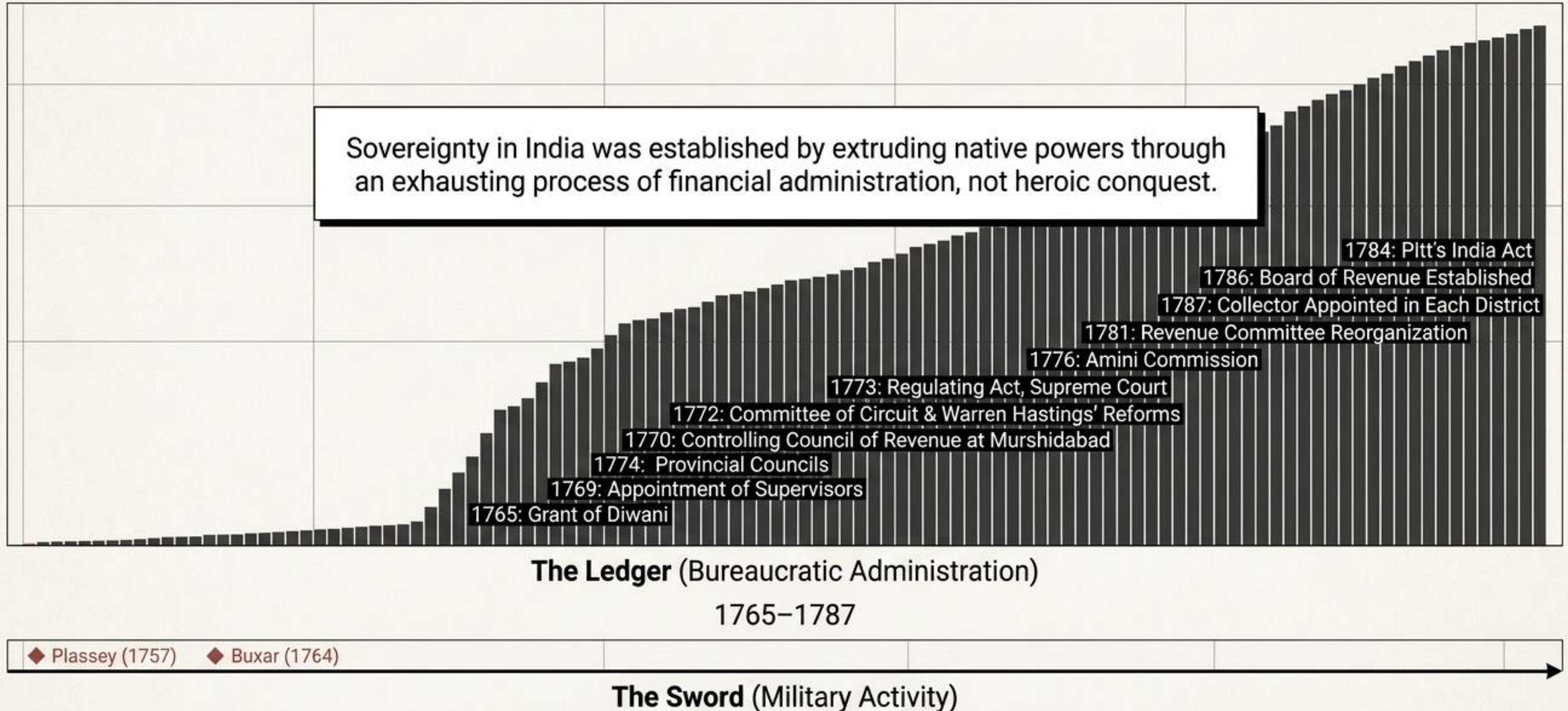


The Legal Reality

Justice Le Maistre: "With regard to this phantom, this man of straw, Mubarick ul Dowlah, it is an insult to the understanding of the Court to have made the question of his Sovereignty... I have too much respect for that body to treat it ludicrously."

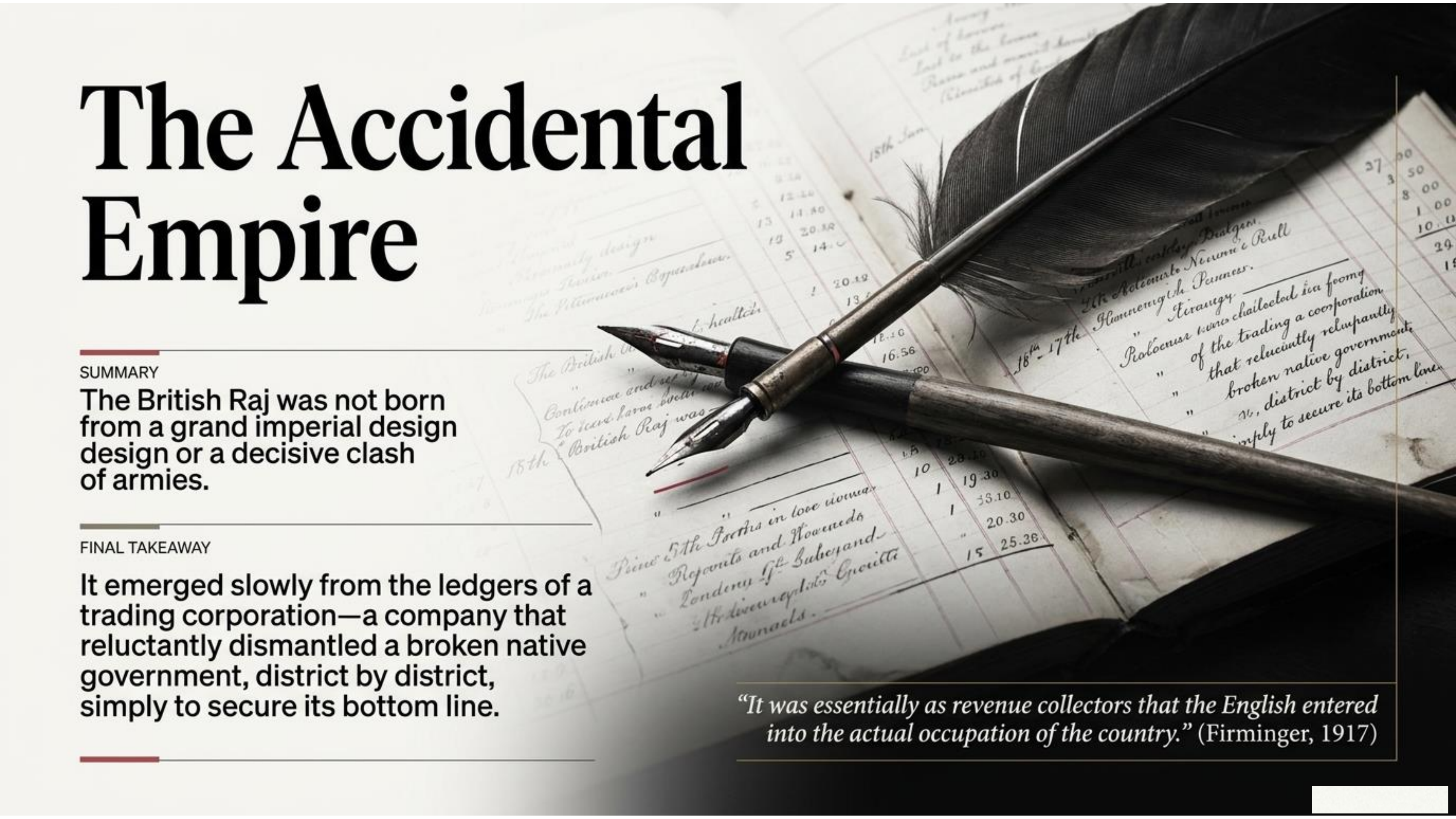
The Impact: The legal fiction was officially dead. The EIC could no longer hide behind the Nawab. English common law had formally recognised the *de facto* conquest of Bengal.

The Sword vs. The Ledger



Context: The EIC expended fractional energy on military battles compared to the decades spent meticulously replacing native tax collection with a rigid British bureaucratic machine.

The Accidental Empire

The background of the slide is a close-up, high-angle shot of an open, antique ledger. The pages are filled with handwritten text in cursive and printed tables of numbers. Two quills are resting on the ledger: one is positioned diagonally across the center, and the other is lying horizontally below it. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, emphasizing the texture of the paper and the feathers of the quills.

SUMMARY

The British Raj was not born from a grand imperial design or a decisive clash of armies.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

It emerged slowly from the ledgers of a trading corporation—a company that reluctantly dismantled a broken native government, district by district, simply to secure its bottom line.

“It was essentially as revenue collectors that the English entered into the actual occupation of the country.” (Firminger, 1917)



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