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Q2

Why did the armies of the British East India Company - mostly comprising of Indian soldiers - win consistently against the more numerous and better equipped armies of the Indian rulers? Give reasons.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 10 marks · Modern Indian History

Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present - significant events, personalities, issues.

Core demand of the question

- Why did the armies of the British East India Company, mostly comprising Indian soldiers, win consistently against more numerous and better equipped Indian rulers?
- Give reasons of organisation, politics, and finance, not a racial myth
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Sepoys were the mass of Company armies; drill, volley fire, and artillery were the edge.

A single officer chain beat coalition hosts of jagirdars.

Subsidiary Alliance and succession politics shrank independent Indian armies.

Coastal supply and Indian credit paid campaigns as a system.

Numerous Indian hosts lost when they could not combine command and treasury.

Introduction

Company victories from Plassey to the Anglo-Maratha wars were not a tale of a few Europeans beating India by blood. Indian sepoy, drilled firepower, and a political method that split Indian courts explain why smaller field forces often won.

Body**Drill, fire, and command**

- Company infantry used volley fire, bayonet drill, and field artillery as one system, which beat larger hosts that still mixed feudal cavalry with uneven matchlocks.
- British officers held a single chain of command, while many Indian armies were coalitions of jagirdars who could leave the line when their own interest shifted.
- The navy moved guns, grain, and men along the coast, so a land army was rarely cut off from Calcutta, Madras, or Bombay.
- Indian soldiers were the mass of the army; the advantage was training, pay in coin, and promotion rules, not the absence of Indian courage.

Politics that shrank the enemy

- **Subsidiary Alliance** under Wellesley parked Company troops on a ruler's revenue and forbade him an independent foreign policy, which turned allies into subsidised clients.
- Doctrine and practice of supporting one claimant in a succession, seen from Bengal after 1757 onward, meant Indian armies often fought other Indians with Company backing.
- **The Company treated war as a balance-sheet:** prize, tribute, and assigned districts paid the next campaign, while many Indian states faced empty treasuries after a single season.

Indian divisions and resources

- Maratha, Mysore, Sikh, and Awadh forces were often well equipped in parts, yet they lacked a shared command against a Company that could fight one front at a time.
- Indian bankers and revenue farmers in the east financed Company credit after Plassey, so the 'foreign' army ate Indian surplus.
- After 1857 the Crown rebuilt the army on a martial-class and mixed-unit pattern; the exam question's pattern of win, however, was already set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Flow diagram

Drill artillery navy -> Field victories
Subsidiary Alliance -> Field victories
Coin credit tribute -> Field victories
Split Indian courts -> Field victories
Indian sepoys -> Drill artillery navy

Conclusion

Company armies won because drill, artillery, naval supply, and a unified officer corps met Indian courts that were politically split and fiscally brittle. Indian sepoys made those victories possible; Indian disunity and Company finance made them repeatable.

Facts & figures

Plassey, 1757

Bengal battle that opened Company territorial power through politics as much as musketry.

Subsidiary Alliance

Wellesley's system that stationed Company troops on a ruler's revenue and curbed his diplomacy.

Cornwallis army reforms

Late-eighteenth-century tightening of Company military and civil discipline in Bengal.

Anglo-Mysore and Anglo-Maratha wars

Long campaigns in which drilled Company forces beat, then absorbed, stronger regional states.

1857

The great sepoy revolt that showed Indian soldiers could also break Company power, after which the Crown rebuilt the army.

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