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The Carnatic Wars: Anglo-French Rivalry

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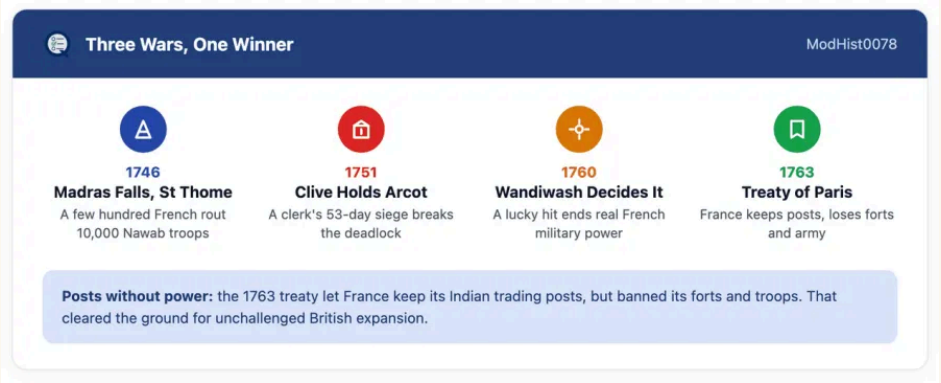
The Carnatic Wars: Anglo-French Rivalry

Britain and France fought three wars on India’s southeastern coast between 1746 and 1763. Each war was really the Indian front of a wider European war.

A young clerk’s siege of a fort, and one lucky artillery shot, decided who would rule India next.



Joseph Francois Dupleix, French governor of Pondicherry. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Posts without power: the 1763 treaty let France keep its trading posts, but banned its forts and army.

> **1746.** Madras falls, French rout a Nawab army at St Thome.
> **1748.** Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle restores Madras to Britain.
> **1751.** Clive seizes and holds Arcot with a small force.
> **1754.** Dupleix is recalled to France.
> **1760.** Battle of Wandiwash decides the contest.
> **1763.** Treaty of Paris ends real French power in India.

Carnatic Wars: three wars fought between the British and French East India Companies on India's southeastern coast, 1746 to 1763.

Nawab: a Mughal-appointed provincial ruler. The Nawab of the Carnatic controlled the region both companies were fighting over.

Subsidiary alliance (early version): propping up a friendly local ruler with your own troops and advisors, in exchange for real control. Dupleix tried this first; the British later perfected it.

1 Why were Britain and France fighting on India's Carnatic coast?

Two rival companies, one coastline, and a European war that spilled straight into India.

- The British and French East India Companies both ran trading posts along India's southeastern **Carnatic coast**.
- Three **Carnatic Wars** were fought between them, from **1746 to 1763**.
- Each war was really the Indian front of a wider European war. The First Carnatic War mirrored the War of the Austrian Succession.
- French governor **Joseph Francois Dupleix** led the French side through most of this period, from his base at Pondicherry.

2 How did the First Carnatic War actually play out?

A tiny French force humiliated a Nawab's army twice, and still had to hand Madras back.

- A French naval squadron under **La Bourdonnais** captured Madras from the British in September 1746.
- The Nawab of the Carnatic sent 10,000 troops to besiege the French at Madras. A French force of roughly 950 men routed this army, not once but twice.
- The second defeat came at the **Battle of St Thome**, on 4 November 1746. Disciplined, rapid-firing European troops had just beaten an army ten times their size.
- The **Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle** (1748) restored Madras to the British, in exchange for the French keeping Louisbourg, a fortress they had captured in North America.

Quick check 1. At St Thome in 1746, a French force of under a thousand men routed a Nawab army of roughly 10,000. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 How did a clerk's siege of Arcot change the war?

A junior company clerk's gamble turned the whole Second Carnatic War around.

- In the Second Carnatic War (1749-54), Dupleix installed his own candidates on two thrones: **Muzaffar Jung** as Nizam of Hyderabad, and **Chanda Sahib** as Nawab of the Carnatic.
- The British backed a rival claimant instead, and defended him at Trichinopoly.

- On 31 August 1751, a young company clerk named **Robert Clive** seized Arcot, Chanda Sahib's own capital, with a small force. He held it through a **53-day siege**, drawing enemy troops away from Trichinopoly.
- Both of Dupleix's installed rulers met violent ends. Dupleix himself was recalled to France in **1754**, his ambitions spent.

> **Quick check 2.** Dupleix installed Chanda Sahib as Nizam of Hyderabad and Muzaffar Jung as Nawab of the Carnatic. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 How did Wandiwash end real French military power?

One lucky artillery shot decided the fate of French power in India.

- The Third Carnatic War mirrored the Seven Years' War being fought in Europe.
- On 22 January 1760, British forces under **Eyre Coote** met the French under the **Comte de Lally** at **Wandiwash**.
- A lucky British artillery shot hit the French gunpowder store, shattering the French left flank. The French line collapsed.
- Lally retreated to Pondicherry. His best general, the **Marquis de Bussy**, was captured. Wandiwash is widely seen as the battle that ended real French military power in India.

5 Why did France keep its posts but lose real power there?

France kept its buildings in India. It lost everything that made them matter.

- The **Treaty of Paris (1763)** ended the Third Carnatic War and the wider Seven Years' War in Europe.
- France got its Indian trading posts back, including Pondicherry. But it could not fortify them, or keep a standing army there.
- This ended any real French political power in India, even though France technically still held its old sites.
- Dupleix's strategy of installing friendly local rulers was an early version of the subsidiary alliance. The British later refined this same idea across the rest of India.

> **Quick check 3.** Under the 1763 Treaty of Paris, France kept its Indian posts but was banned from fortifying them or keeping troops there. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 What role did Dupleix's own wife play behind the scenes?

Behind Dupleix's own policy sat an advisor few history books name.

- Dupleix's wife, **Jeanne**, was a Creole of Tamil and Portuguese descent, known locally as **"Jeanne Begum."**
- She reputedly drafted much of Dupleix's most sensitive correspondence, in Persian and Tamil.
- She acted as his political advisor, and personally took part in talks with local rulers.

- Her influence shows how deeply local knowledge, not just European muskets, shaped the Carnatic Wars.

Remember: three wars, one pattern: small disciplined forces kept beating much larger Indian armies. France's 1763 treaty kept its buildings, not its power.

> **Think it through:** Why would winning the Battle of Wandiwash matter more than any single Carnatic War battle before it?
>
> Earlier French defeats, like St Thome, were still reversible, since France still held real territory and a functioning army afterward. Wandiwash broke the French army itself, and captured its best remaining general. Without an army, France had nothing left to negotiate with except its buildings, exactly what the 1763 treaty then confirmed.

Practice MCQs

1. French Governor Joseph François Dupleix pursued political power in the Carnatic mainly through which strategy?

A. Direct military annexation of Indian territory

B. Forming a naval blockade of British ports

C. Purchasing land directly from the Mughal emperor

D. Installing friendly Nawabs as puppet rulers loyal to French interests

See answer ↓

2. Dupleix was recalled to France in 1754. What did the resulting Treaty of Pondicherry commit both companies to?

A. Stopping both companies from interfering in local Indian succession disputes

B. Splitting the Carnatic region equally between Britain and France

C. Returning Madras permanently to France

D. Merging the two companies' trading rights

See answer ↓

3. Robert Clive's celebrated defence of Arcot in 1751 lasted how many days?

A. 21

B. 53

C. 90

D. 120

See answer ↓

4. In August 1751, Robert Clive captured Arcot, Chanda Sahib's own capital. With roughly how many men, and to what purpose?

A. About 5,000 men, to relieve Madras from a French siege

B. About 210 men, to draw Chanda Sahib's troops away from the siege of Trichinopoly

C. About 210 men, to negotiate a truce directly with Chanda Sahib

D. About 2,000 men, to permanently occupy Chanda Sahib's capital

See answer ↓

5. The decisive Battle of Wandiwash (1760), which effectively ended serious French ambitions for political dominance in India, was fought between?

A. The Nizam of Hyderabad and the French

B. The Nawab of Carnatic and the English

C. The English and Hyder Ali

D. The English and the French

See answer ↓

6. How did Dupleix's life end, after his recall to France?

A. He retired wealthy, and lived out his years in comfort near Paris

B. He died in near-poverty in Paris, in 1763, never reimbursed for his spending

C. He returned to India as a private trader, and rebuilt his fortune

D. He was imprisoned by the French crown, for his conduct in India

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** Dupleix backed candidates for the Nawabship of the Carnatic and the Hyderabad throne who were loyal to French interests, extending French influence without formal annexation. The British countered with their own rival candidates, turning succession disputes into proxy wars. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The Treaty of Pondicherry, signed in December 1754, committed both the British and French East India Companies to stop interfering in local succession disputes. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Clive held Arcot for 53 days with just 500 men, a defence that broke French momentum in the Second Carnatic War. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Clive captured Arcot with only around 210 men, then held it through a 53-day siege -- a diversionary tactic that drew Chanda Sahib's forces away from Trichinopoly. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The decisive Battle of Wandiwash (1760), fought between British and French forces, effectively ended serious French political ambitions in India. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** Dupleix spent much of his own fortune funding French ambitions in India. The Company never reimbursed him, and he died in near-poverty in Paris, in 1763. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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