

# Nabob

A **nabob** /ˈneɪbɒb/ is an Anglo-Indian term for a conspicuously wealthy man who made his fortune in the Orient, especially in India with the privately held East India Company.<sup>[1]</sup>

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An 1811 caricature of contemporary British nabobs

## Etymology

The word came to English from Urdu, possibly from Hindustani *nawāb*/*navāb*,<sup>[2]</sup> borrowed into English during British colonial rule in India. It is possible this was via the intermediate Portuguese *nababo*, the Portuguese having preceded the British in India.

The origin of the term is from Arabic, in which نوّاب (*nuwwāb*) is the plural form of نائب (*nāʾib*), meaning "deputy".<sup>[3]</sup> Local Indian rulers were originally given this name as – in theory at least – they deputized on behalf of the Mughal emperor. The use of the plural form is honorific.<sup>[4]</sup>

The word entered colloquial usage in England from 1612. Native Europeans used "nabob" to refer to those who returned from India after having made a fortune there.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

## History

The English use of a "nabob" was for a person who become rapidly wealthy in a foreign country, typically India, and returned home with considerable power and influence.<sup>[7]</sup> In England, the name was applied to men who made fortunes working for the East India Company and, on their return home, used the wealth to purchase seats in Parliament.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

A common fear was that these individuals – the nabobs, their agents, and those who took their bribes – would use their wealth and influence to corrupt Parliament. The collapse of the Company's finances in 1772 due to bad administration, both in India and Britain, aroused public indignation towards the Company's activities and the behaviour of the Company's employees.<sup>[8]</sup>

This perception of the pernicious influence wielded by nabobs in both social and political life led to increased scrutiny of the East India Company. A number of prominent Company men underwent inquiries and impeachments on charges of corruption and misrule in India.<sup>[8]</sup> Warren Hastings, first Governor-General of India, was impeached in 1788 and acquitted in 1795 after a seven-year-long trial. Robert Clive, 1st Baron Clive, MP for Shrewsbury, was forced to defend himself against charges brought against him in the House of Commons.<sup>[5][10]</sup> Pitt's India Act of 1784 gave the British government effective control of the private company for the first time. The new policies were designed for an elite civil service career that minimized temptations for corruption.<sup>[11]</sup>

In late 19th century San Francisco, rapid urbanization led to an exclusive enclave of the rich and famous on the west coast who built large mansions in the Nob Hill neighborhood. This included prominent tycoons such as Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University and other members of The Big Four who were known as *nabobs*, which was shortened to nob, giving the area its eventual name.<sup>[12]</sup>

## In popular culture

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Samuel Foote's 1772 play, *The Nabob*, was a comedy satirizing those who gained money from the East India Company.

The term was once memorably used by American wordsmith William Safire in a speech written for United States President Richard Nixon's then vice-president, Spiro Agnew (1969–1974). In a diatribe which received heavy media coverage Safire had Agnew, increasingly identified with his scathing attacks on that administration's critics, painting these opponents as "nattering nabobs of negativism".<sup>[13]</sup>

The 1992 Disney movie Aladdin includes a song where the Genie calls Aladdin a nabob.<sup>[14]</sup>

## See also

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- Nob Hill, San Francisco
- Nobby

## Notes

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## External links

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- [India and the British – The East India Company – Nabobs](#)
  - [The First Asians in Britain](#)
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