

## Freedom Struggle

In ancient times, people from all over the world were keen to come to India. The Persians followed by the Iranians and Parsis immigrated to India. Then came the Moghuls and they too settled down permanently in India. Chengis Khan, the Mongolian, invaded and looted India many times. Alexander the Great too, came to conquer India but went back after a battle with Porus. He-en Tsang from China came in pursuit of knowledge and to visit the ancient Indian universities of Nalanda and Takshila. Columbus wanted to come to India, but instead landed on the shores of America. Vasco da Gama from Portugal came to trade his country's goods in return for Indian spices. The French came and established their colonies in India.

Lastly, the Britishers came and ruled over India for nearly 200 years. After the battle of Plassey in 1757, the British achieved political power in India. And their paramountcy was established during the tenure of Lord Dalhousie, who became the Governor- General in 1848. He annexed Punjab, Peshawar and the Pathan tribes in the north-west of India. And by 1856, the British conquest and its authority were firmly established. And while the British power gained its heights during the middle of the 19th century, the discontent of the local rulers, the peasantry, the intellectuals, common masses as also of the soldiers who became unemployed due to the disbanding of the armies of various states that were annexed by the British, became widespread. This soon broke out into a revolt which assumed the dimensions of the 1857 Mutiny.

## The Indian Mutiny of 1857

The conquest of India, which could be said to have begun with the Battle of Plassey (1757), was practically completed by the end of Dalhousie's tenure in 1856. It had been by no means a smooth affair as the simmering discontent of the people manifested itself in many localized revolt during this period. However, the Mutiny of 1857, which began with a revolt of the military soldiers at Meerut, soon became widespread and posed a grave challenge to the British rule. Even though the British succeeded in crushing it within a year, it was certainly a popular revolt in which the Indian rulers, the masses and the militia participated so enthusiastically that it came to be regarded as the First War of Indian Independence.

Introduction of zamindari system by the British, where the peasants were ruined through exorbitant charges made from them by the new class of landlords. The craftsmen were destroyed by the influx of the British manufactured goods. The religion and the caste system which formed the firm foundation of the traditional Indian society was endangered by the British administration. The Indian soldiers as well as people in administration could not rise in hierarchy as the senior jobs were reserved for the Europeans. Thus, there was all-round discontent and disgust against the British rule, which burst out in a revolt by the 'sepoys' at Meerut whose religious sentiments were offended when they were given new cartridges greased with cow and pig fat, whose covering had to be stripped out by biting with the mouth before using them in rifles. The Hindu as well as the Muslim soldiers, who refused to

use such cartridges, were arrested which resulted in a revolt by their fellow soldiers on May 9, 1857.

The rebel forces soon captured Delhi and the revolt spread to a wider area and there was uprising in almost all parts of the country. The most ferocious battles were fought in Delhi, Awadh, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, Allahabad, Agra, Meerut and western Bihar. The rebellious forces under the commands of Kanwar Singh in Bihar and Bakht Khan in Delhi gave a stunning blow to the British. In Kanpur, Nana Sahib was proclaimed as the Peshwa and the brave leader Tantya Tope led his troops. Rani Lakshmibai was proclaimed the ruler of Jhansi who led her troops in the heroic battles with the British. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs and all the other brave sons of India fought shoulder to shoulder to throw out the British. The revolt was controlled by the British within one year, it began from Meerut on 10 May 1857 and ended in Gwalior on 20 June 1858.

### End of the East India Company

Consequent to the failure of the Revolt of 1857 rebellion, one also saw the end of the East India Company's rule in India and many important changes took place in the British Government's policy towards India which sought to strengthen the British rule through winning over the Indian princes, the chiefs and the landlords. Queen Victoria's Proclamation of November 1, 1858 declared that thereafter India would be governed by and in the name of the British Monarch through a Secretary of State.

### **Queen Victoria:**

The Governor General was given title of Viceroy, which meant the representative of the Monarch. Queen Victoria assumed the title of the Empress of India and thus gave the British Government unlimited powers to intervene in the internal affair of the Indian states. In brief, the British paramountcy over India, including the Indian States, was firmly established. The British gave their support to the loyal princes, zamindar and local chiefs but neglected the educated people and the common masses. They also promoted the other interests like those of the British merchants, industrialists, planters and civil servants. The people of India, as such, did not have any say in running the government or formulation of its policies. Consequently, people's disgust with the British rule kept mounting, which gave rise to the birth of Indian National Movement.

The leadership of the freedom movement passed into the hands of reformists like Raja Rammohan Roy, Bankim Chandra and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. During this time, the binding psychological concept of National Unity was also forged in the fire of the struggle against a common foreign oppressor.

### Formation of Indian National Congress (INC)

The foundations of the Indian National Movement were laid by Surendranath Banerjee with the formation of Indian Association at Calcutta in 1876. The aim of the Association was to

represent the views of the educated middle class, inspire the Indian community to take the value of united action. The Indian Association was, in a way, the forerunner of the Indian National Congress, which was founded, with the help of A.O. Hume, a retired British official. The birth of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 marked the entry of new educated middle-class into politics and transformed the Indian political horizon. The first session of the Indian National Congress was held in Bombay in December 1885 under the president ship of Womesh Chandra Banerjee and was attended among others by and Badr-uddin-Tyabji.

At the turn of the century, the freedom movement reached out to the common unlettered man through the launching of the "Swadeshi Movement" by leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose. The Congress session at Calcutta in 1906, presided by Dadabhai Naoroji, gave a call for attainment of 'Swaraj' a type of self-government elected by the people within the British Dominion, as it prevailed in Canada and Australia, which were also the parts of the British Empire.

Meanwhile, in 1909, the British Government announced certain reforms in the structure of Government in India which are known as Morley-Minto Reforms. But these reforms came as a disappointment as they did not mark any advance towards the establishment of a representative Government.

The disgust with the reforms announced in 1909 led to the intensification of the struggle for Swaraj. While, on one side, the activists led by the great leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal waged a virtual war against the British, on the other side, the revolutionaries stepped up their violent activities. There was a widespread unrest in the country. To add to the already growing discontent among the people, Rowlatt Act was passed in 1919, which empowered the Government to put people in jail without trial. This caused widespread indignation, led to massive demonstration and hartals, which the Government repressed with brutal measures like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, where thousand of unarmed peaceful people were gunned down on the order of General Dyer.

### Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 13, 1919 was one of the most inhuman acts of the British rulers in India. The people of Punjab gathered on the auspicious day of Baisakhi at Jallianwala Bagh, adjacent to Golden Temple (Amritsar), to lodge their protest peacefully against persecution by the British Indian Government. General Dyer appeared suddenly with his armed police force and fired indiscriminately at innocent empty handed people leaving hundreds of people dead, including women and children.

After the First World War (1914-1918), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi became the undisputed leader of the Congress. During this struggle, Mahatma Gandhi had developed the novel technique of non-violent agitation, which he called 'Satyagraha', loosely translated as 'moral domination'. Gandhi, himself a devout Hindu, also espoused a total moral philosophy of tolerance, brotherhood of all religions, non-violence (ahimsa) and of simple

living. With this, new leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose also emerged on the scene and advocated the adoption of complete independence as the goal of the National Movement.

### The Non-Cooperation Movement

The Non-Cooperation Movement was pitched in under leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress from September 1920 to February 1922, marking a new awakening in the Indian Independence Movement. After a series of events including the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, Gandhiji realised that there was no prospect of getting any fair treatment at the hands of British, so he planned to withdraw the nation's co-operation from the British Government, thus launching the Non-Cooperation Movement and thereby marring the administrative set up of the country. This movement was a great success as it got massive encouragement to millions of Indians. This movement almost shook the British authorities.

#### **Simon Commission:**

The Non-cooperation movement failed. Therefore there was a lull in political activities. The Simon Commission was sent to India in 1927 by the British Government to suggest further reforms in the structure of Indian Government. The Commission did not include any Indian member and the Government showed no intention of accepting the demand for Swaraj. Therefore, it sparked a wave of protests all over the country and the Congress as well as the Muslim League gave a call to boycott it under the leadership of Lala Lajpat Rai. The crowds were lathi charged and Lala Lajpat Rai, also called Sher-e-Punjab (Lion of Punjab) died of the blows received in an agitation.

### Civil Disobedience Movement

Mahatma Gandhi led the Civil Disobedience Movement that was launched in the Congress Session of December 1929. The aim of this movement was a complete disobedience of the orders of the British Government. During this movement it was decided that India would celebrate 26th January as Independence Day all over the country. On 26th January 1930, meetings were held all over the country and the Congress tricolour was hoisted. The British Government tried to repress the movement and resorted to brutal firing, killing hundreds of people. Thousands were arrested along with Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru. But the movement spread to all the four corners of the country. Following this, Round Table Conferences were arranged by the British and Gandhiji attended the second Round Table Conference at London. But nothing came out of the conference and the Civil Disobedience Movement was revived.

During this time, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were arrested on the charges of throwing a bomb in the Central Assembly Hall (which is now Lok Sabha) in Delhi, to demonstrate against the autocratic alien rule. They were hanged to death on March 23, 1931.

## Quit India Movement

In August 1942, Gandhiji started the 'Quit India Movement' and decided to launch a mass civil disobedience movement 'Do or Die' call to force the British to leave India. The movement was followed, nonetheless, by large-scale violence directed at railway stations, telegraph offices, government buildings, and other emblems and institutions of colonial rule. There were widespread acts of sabotage, and the government held Gandhi responsible for these acts of violence, suggesting that they were a deliberate act of Congress policy. However, all the prominent leaders were arrested, the Congress was banned and the police and army were brought out to suppress the movement.

Meanwhile, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who stealthily ran away from the British detention in Calcutta, reached foreign lands and organized the Indian National Army (INA) to overthrow the British from India.

**"Give me blood and I shall give you freedom"** - was one of the most popular statements made by him, where he urges the people of India to join him in his freedom movement.

## Partition of India and Pakistan

At the conclusion of the Second World War, the Labour Party, under Prime Minister Clement Richard Attlee, came to power in Britain. The Labour Party was largely sympathetic towards Indian people for freedom. A Cabinet Mission was sent to India in March 1946, which after a careful study of the Indian political scenario, proposed the formation of an interim Government and convening of a Constituent Assembly comprising members elected by the provincial legislatures and nominees of the Indian states. An interim Government was formed headed by Jawaharlal Nehru. However, the Muslim League refused to participate in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly and pressed for the separate state for Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy of India, presented a plan for the division of India into India and Pakistan, and the Indian leaders had no choice but to accept the division, as the Muslim League was adamant.

Thus, India became free at the stroke of midnight, on August 14, 1947. (Since then, every year India celebrates its Independence Day on 15<sup>th</sup> August). Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of free India and continued his term till 1964.

Earlier, a Constituent Assembly was formed in July 1946, to frame the Constitution of India and Dr. Rajendra Prasad was elected its President. The Constitution of India which was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1949. On January 26, 1950, the Constitution came into force and Dr. Rajendra Prasad was elected the first President of India.