

# The Revolt of 1857

The revolt of 1857 was a product of the character and policies of rule. The cumulative effect of British expansionist policies, economic exploitation and administrative innovations over the years had adversely affected the positions of all— rulers of Indian states, sepoys, zamindars, peasants, traders, artisans, pundits, maulvis, etc. The simmering discontent burst in the form of a violent storm in 1857 which shook the British empire in India to its very foundations.

The causes of the revolt emerged from all aspects— socio-cultural, economic and political—of daily existence of Indian population cutting through all sections and classes. These causes are discussed below.

## **ECONOMIC CAUSES**

The colonial policies of the East India Company destroyed the traditional economic fabric of the Indian society. The peasantry were never really to recover from the disabilities imposed by the new and a highly unpopular revenue settlement (see chapter on "Economic Impact of British Rule in India" for details). Impoverished by heavy taxation, the peasants resorted to loans from moneylenders/traders at usurious rates, the latter often evicting the former on non-payment of debt dues. These moneylenders and traders emerged as the new landlords. While the scourge of indebtedness has continued to plague Indian society to this day.

British rule also meant misery to the artisans and handicraftsmen. The annexation of Indian states by the Company cut off their major source of patronage. Added to this, British policy discouraged Indian handicrafts and promoted British goods. The highly skilled Indian craftsmen were forced to look for alternate sources of employment that hardly existed, as the destruction of Indian handicrafts was not accompanied by the development of modern industries. Karl Marx remarked in 1853: "It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning-wheel. England began with depriving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons."

Zamindars, the traditional landed aristocracy, often saw their land rights forfeited with frequent use of a quo warranto by the administration. This resulted in a loss of status for them in the villages. In Awadh, the storm center of the revolt, 21,000 taluqdars had their estates confiscated and suddenly found themselves without a source of income, "unable to work, ashamed to beg, condemned to penury". These dispossessed taluqdars seized the opportunity presented by the sepoy revolt to oppose the British and regain what they had lost.

The ruination of Indian industry increased the pressure on agriculture and land, the lopsided development in which resulted in pauperization of the country in general.

### **POLITICAL CAUSES**

The East India Company's greedy policy of aggrandizement accompanied by broken pledges and oaths resulted in loss of political prestige for it, on the one hand, and caused suspicion in the minds of almost all ruling princes in India, on the other, through such policies as of 'Effective Control', 'Subsidiary Alliance' and 'Doctrine of Lapse'. The right of succession was denied to Hindu princes. The house of Mughals was humbled when on Prince Faqiruddin's death in 1856, whose succession had been recognized conditionally by Lord Dalhousie. Lord Canning announced that the next prince on succession would have to renounce the regal title and the ancestral Mughal palaces, in addition to renunciations agreed upon by Prince Faqiruddin.

The collapse of rulers—the erstwhile aristocracy—also adversely affected those sections of the Indian society which derived their sustenance from cultural and religious pursuits.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE CAUSES**

Rampant corruption in the Company's administration, especially among the police, petty officials and lower law courts, and the absentee sovereignty character of British rule imparted a foreign and alien look to it in the eyes of Indians.

### **SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CAUSES**

Racial overtones and a superiority complex characterized the British administrative attitude towards the native Indian population. The activities of Christian missionaries who followed the British flag in India were looked upon with suspicion by Indians. The attempts at socio-religious reform such as abolition of sati, support to widow-remarriage and women's education were seen by a large section of the population as interference in the social and religious domains of Indian society by outsiders. These fears were further compounded by the Government's decision to tax mosque and temple lands and legislative measures, such as the Religious Disabilities Act, 1856, which modified Hindu customs, for instance declaring that a change of religion did not debar a son from inheriting the property of his heathen father.

### **INFLUENCE OF OUTSIDE EVENTS**

The revolt of 1857 coincided with certain outside events in which the British suffered serious losses—the First Afghan War (1838-42), Punjab Wars (1845-49), Crimean Wars (1854-56), Santhal rebellion (1855-57). These had obvious psychological repercussions.

### **DISCONTENT AMONG SEPOYS**

The conditions of service in the Company's Army and cantonments increasingly came into conflict with the religious beliefs and prejudices of the sepoys. Restrictions on wearing caste and sectarian marks and secret rumors of proselytizing

activities of chaplains (often maintained on the Company's expenses) were interpreted by Indian sepoys, who were generally conservative by nature, as interference in their religious affairs. To the religious Hindu of the time, crossing the seas meant loss of caste. In 1856 Lord Canning's Government passed the General Service Enlistment Act which decreed that all future recruits to the Bengal Army would have to give an undertaking to serve anywhere their services might be required by the Government. This caused resentment.

The Indian sepoy was equally unhappy with his emoluments compared to his British counterpart. A more immediate cause of the sepoys' dissatisfaction was the order that they would not be given the foreign service allowance (Matta) when serving in Sindh or in Punjab. The annexation of Awadh, home of many of the sepoys, further inflamed their feelings.

The Indian sepoy was made to feel a subordinate at every step and was discriminated against racially and in matters of promotion and privileges. The discontent of the sepoys was not limited to matters military; it reflected the general disenchantment with and opposition to British rule. The sepoy, in fact, was a 'peasant in uniform' whose consciousness was not divorced from that of the rural population. "The Army voiced grievances other than its own; and the movement spread beyond the Army", observes Gopal.

Finally, there had been a long history of revolts in the British Indian Army—in Bengal (1764), Vellore (1806), Barrackpore (1825) and during the Afghan Wars (1838-42) to mention just a few.

## **BEGINNING AND SPREAD**

The reports about the mixing of bone dust in ratta (flour) and the introduction of the Enfield rifle enhanced the sepoys' growing disaffection with the Government. The cartridge of the new rifle had to be bitten off before loading and the grease was reportedly made of beef and pig fat. The Army's administration did nothing to allay these fears, and the sepoys felt their religion was in grave danger.

The greased cartridges did not create a new cause of discontent in the Army, but supplied the occasion for the simmering discontent to come out in the open. The revolt began at Meerut, 58 km from Delhi, on May 10, 1857 and then, gathering force rapidly, soon embraced a vast area from the Punjab in the north and the Narmada in the south to Bihar in the east and Rajputana in the west.

Even before the Meerut incident, there were rumblings of resentment in various cantonments. The 19th Native Infantry at Berhampur, which refused to use the newly introduced Enfield rifle and broke out in mutiny in February 1857, was disbanded in March 1857. A young sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry, Mangal Pande, went a step further and fired at the sergeant major of his unit at Barrackpore. He was overpowered and executed on April 6 while his regiment was disbanded in May. The 7th Awadh Regiment which defied its officers on May 3 met with a similar

fate. And then came the explosion at Meerut. On April 24, ninety men of 3rd Native Cavalry refused to accept the greased cartridges. On May 9, eighty-five of them were dismissed, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and put in fetters. This sparked off a general mutiny among the Indian soldiers stationed at Meerut. The very next day, on May 10, they released their imprisoned comrades, killed their officers and unfurled the banner of revolt. They set off for Delhi after sunset. In Delhi, the local infantry joined them, killed their own European officers including Simon Fraser, the political agent, and seized the city. Lieutenant Willoughby, the officer-in charge of the magazine at Delhi, offered some resistance, but was overcome. The aged and powerless Bahadur Shah Zafar was proclaimed the emperor of India.

Delhi was soon to become the centre of the Great Revolt and Bahadur Shah, its symbol. This spontaneous raising of the last Mughal king to the leadership of the country was a recognition of the fact that the long reign of Mughal dynasty had become the traditional symbol of India's political unity. With this single act, the sepoys had transformed a mutiny of soldiers into a revolutionary war, while all Indian chiefs who took part in the revolt hastened to proclaim their loyalty to the Mughal emperor.

Bahadur Shah, after initial vacillation, wrote letters to all the chiefs and rulers of India urging them to organize a confederacy of Indian states to fight and replace the British regime. The entire Bengal Army soon rose in revolt which spread quickly. Awadh, Rohilkhand, the Doab, the Bundelkhand, central India, large parts of Bihar and East Punjab shook off British authority.

The revolt of the sepoys was accompanied by a rebellion of the civil population, particularly in the north-western provinces and Awadh. Their accumulated grievances found immediate expression and they rose en masse to give vent to their opposition to British rule. It is the widespread participation in the revolt by the peasantry, the artisans, shopkeepers, day laborers, zamindars, religious mendicants, priests and 'civil servants' which gave it real strength as well as the character of a popular revolt. Here the peasants and petty zamindars gave free expression to their grievances by attacking the moneylenders and zamindars who had displaced them from the land. They took advantage of the revolt to destroy the moneylenders' account books and debt records. They also attacked the British-established law courts, revenue offices (tehsils), revenue records and police stations.

According to one estimate, of the total number of about 1,50,000 men who died fighting the English in Awadh, over 1,00,000 were civilians.

Within a month of the capture of Delhi, the revolt spread to different parts of the country.

### **STORM CENTRES AND LEADERS OF THE REVOLT**

At Delhi the nominal and symbolic leadership belonged to the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, but the real command lay with a court of soldiers headed by General Bakht Khan who had led the revolt of Bareilly troops and brought them to Delhi. The court consisted of ten members, six from the army and four from the civilian departments. The court conducted the affairs of the state in the name of the emperor. Emperor Bahadur Shah was perhaps the weakest link in the chain of leadership of the revolt. His weak personality, old age and lack of leadership qualities created political weakness at the nerve centre of the revolt and did incalculable damage to it.

At Kanpur, the natural choice was Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II. He was refused the family title and, banished from Poona, was living near Kanpur. Nana Saheb expelled the English from Kanpur, proclaimed himself the Peshwa, acknowledged Bahadur Shah as the emperor of India and declared himself to be his governor. Sir Hugh Wheeler, commanding the station, surrendered on June 27, 1857.

Begum Hazrat Mahal took over the reigns at Lucknow where the rebellion broke out on June 4, 1857 and popular sympathy was overwhelmingly in favour of the deposed Nawab. Her son, Birjis Qadir, was proclaimed the Nawab and a regular administration was organized with important offices shared equally by Muslims and Hindus. Henry Lawrence, the British resident, the European inhabitants and a few hundred loyal sepoys took shelter in the residency. The residency was besieged by the Indian rebels and Sir Henry was killed during the siege. The command of the besieged garrison devolved on Brigadier Inglis who held out against heavy odds. The early attempts of Sir Henry Havelock and Sir James Outram to recover Lucknow met with no success. Finally, Sir Colin Campbell, the new commander-in-chief, evacuated the Europeans with the help of Gorkha regiments. In March 1858, the city was finally recovered by the British, but guerrilla activity continued till September of the same year.

At Bareilly, Khan Bahadur, a descendant of the former ruler of Rohilkhand, was placed in command. Not enthusiastic about the pension being granted by the British, he organized an army of 40,000 soldiers and offered stiff resistance to the British.

In Bihar, the revolt was led by Kunwar Singh, the zamindar of Jagdish-pur. An old man in his seventies, he nursed a grudge against the British who had deprived him of his estates. He unhesitatingly joined the sepoys when they reached Arrah from Dinapore.

Maulvi Ahmadullah of Faizabad was another outstanding leader of the revolt. He was a native of Madras and had moved to Faizabad in the north where he fought a stiff battle against the British troops. He emerged as

one of the revolt's acknowledged leaders once it broke out in Awadh in May 1857.

The most outstanding leader of the revolt was Rani Laxmibai, who assumed the leadership of the sepoys at Jhansi. Lord Dalhousie, the governor-general, had refused to allow her adopted son to succeed to the throne after her husband Raja Ganbadhar Rao died, and had annexed the state by the application of the infamous 'Doctrine of Lapse'. Driven out of Jhansi by British forces, she gave the battle cry—"main apni Jhansi nahi doongi" (I shall not give away my Jhansi). She was joined by Tantia Tope, a close associate of Nana Saheb, after the loss of Kanpur. Rani of Jhansi and Tantia Tope marched towards Gwalior where they were hailed by the Indian soldiers. The Scindhia, the local ruler, however, decided to side with the English and took shelter at Agra. Nana Saheb was proclaimed the Peshwa and plans were chalked out for a march into the south. Gwalior was recaptured by the English in June 1858.

For more than a year the rebels carried on their struggle against heavy odds.

### **SUPPRESSION OF REVOLT**

The revolt was finally suppressed. The British captured Delhi on September 20, 1857 after prolonged and bitter fighting. John Nicholson, the leader of the siege, was badly wounded and later succumbed to his injuries. Bahadur Shah was taken prisoner. The royal princes were captured and butchered on the spot, publicly shot at point blank range, by Lieutenant Hudson himself. The emperor was exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862. Thus the great House of Mughals was finally and completely extinguished. Terrible vengeance was wreaked on the inhabitants of Delhi. With the fall of Delhi the focal point of the revolt disappeared.

One by one, all the great leaders of the revolt fell. Military operations for the recapture of Kanpur were closely associated with the recovery of Lucknow. Sir Colin Campbell occupied Kanpur on December 6, 1857. Nana Saheb, defeated at Kanpur, escaped to Nepal in early 1859, never to be heard of again. His close associate Tantia Tope escaped into the jungles of central India, was captured while asleep in April 1859 and put to death. The Rani of Jhansi had died on the battlefield earlier in June 1858. Jhansi was recaptured through assault by Sir Hugh Rose. By 1859, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Rao Sahib (brother of Nana Saheb) and Maulvi Ahmadullah were all dead, while the Begum of Awadh was compelled to hide in Nepal. At Benaras a rebellion had been organized which was mercilessly suppressed, by Colonel Neil, who put to death all suspected rebels and even disorderly sepoys.

By the end of 1859, British authority over India was fully reestablished. The British Government had to pour immense supplies of men, money and arms into the country, though Indians had to later repay the entire cost through their own suppression.

### **CAUSES OF FAILURE OF REVOLT**

Limited territorial spread was one factor; there was no all-India veneer about the revolt. The eastern, southern and western parts of India remained more or less unaffected.

Certain classes and groups did not join and, in fact, worked against the revolt. Big zamindars acted as "breakwaters to storm"; even Awadh tahacildars backed off once promises of land restitution were spelt out.

Moneylenders and merchants suffered the wrath of the mutineers badly and anyway saw their class interests better protected under British patronage. Modern educated Indians viewed this revolt as backward looking, and mistakenly hoped the British would usher in an era of modernisation. Most Indian rulers refused to join and often gave active help to the British. By one estimate, not more than one-fourth of the total area and not more than one-tenth of the total population was affected.

The Indian soldiers were poorly equipped materially, fighting generally with swords and spears and very few guns and muskets. On the other hand, the European soldiers were equipped with the latest weapons of war like the Enfield rifle. The electric telegraph kept the commander-in-chief informed about the movements and strategy of the rebels.

The revolt was poorly organized with no coordination or central leadership. The principal rebel leaders—Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, Kunwar Singh, Laxmibai—were no match to their British opponents in generalship. On the other hand, the East India Company was fortunate in having the services of men of exceptional abilities in the Lawrence brothers, John Nicholson, James Outram, Henry Havelock, Edward, etc.

The mutineers lacked a clear understanding of colonial rule; nor did they have a forward looking programme, a coherent ideology, a political perspective or a societal alternative. The rebels represented diverse elements with differing grievances and concepts of current politics.

The lack of unity among Indians was perhaps unavoidable at this stage of Indian history. Modern nationalism was yet unknown in India. In fact, the revolt of 1857 played an important role in bringing the Indian people together and imparting to them the consciousness of belonging to one country.

### **HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY FACTOR**

During the entire revolt, there was complete cooperation between Hindus and Muslims at all levels—people, soldiers, leaders. All rebels acknowledged Bahadur Shah Zafar, a Muslim, as the emperor and the first impulse of the Hindu sepoys at Meerut was to march to Delhi, the Mughal imperial capital. Rebels and sepoys, both Hindu and Muslim, respected each other's sentiments. Immediate banning of cow

slaughter was ordered once the revolt was successful in a particular area. Both Hindus and Muslims were well represented in leadership, for instance Nana Saheb had Azimullah, a Muslim and an expert in political propaganda, as an aide, while Laxmibai had the solid support of Afghan soldiers.

Thus, the events of 1857 demonstrated that the people and politics of India were not basically communal before 1858.

## **NATURE OF THE REVOLT**

Views differ on the nature of the 1857 revolt. It was a mere 'Sepoy Mutiny' to some British historians—"a wholly unpatriotic and selfish Sepoy Mutiny with no native leadership and no popular support", said Sir John Seeley. However, it is not a complete picture of the event as it involved many sections of the civilian population and not just the sepoys. The discontent of the sepoys was just one cause of the disturbance.

Dr K. Datta considers the revolt of 1857 to have been "in the main a military outbreak, which was taken advantage of by certain discontented princes and landlords, whose interests had been affected by the new political order". The last mentioned factor gave it an aura of a popular uprising in certain areas. It was "never all-Indian in character, but was localised, restricted and poorly organized". Further, says Datta, the movement was marked by absence of cohesion and unity of purpose among the various sections of the rebels.

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the 1857 revolt came to be interpreted as a "planned war of national independence", by V.D. Savarkar in his book, *First War of Indian Independence*. Dr S.N. Sen in his *Eighteen FiftySeven* considers the revolt as having begun as a fight for religion but ended as a war of independence. Dr R.C. Majumdar, however, considers it as neither the first, nor national, nor a war of independence as large parts of the country remained unaffected and many sections of the people took no part in the upsurge.

According to Marxist historians, the 1857 revolt was "the struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign as well as feudal bondage". However, this view does not stand scrutiny in the light of the fact that the leaders of the revolt themselves came from a feudal background.

The revolt of 1857 is not easy to categorise. While one can easily dismiss some views such as those of L.E.R. Rees who considered it to be a war of fanatic religionists against Christians or T.R. Holmes who saw in it a conflict between civilisation and barbarism, one cannot quite go so far as to accept it as a war for independence. It had seeds of nationalism and anti-imperialism but the concept of common nationality and nationhood was not inherent to the revolt of 1857.



One may say that the revolt of 1857 was the first great struggle of Indians to throw off British rule. It established local traditions of resistance to British rule which were to pave the way for the modern national movement.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

The revolt of 1857 marks a turning point in the history of India. It led to changes in the system of administration and the policy of the Government.

(i) The direct responsibility for the administration of the country was assumed by the British Crown and Company rule was abolished. The assumption of the Government of India by the sovereign of Great Britain was announced by Lord Canning at a durbar at Allahabad in the 'Queen's Proclamation' issued on November 1, 1858.

(ii) The era of annexations and expansion ended and the British promised to respect the dignity and rights of the native princes.

(iii) The Indian states were henceforth to recognise the paramountcy of the British Crown and were to be treated as parts of a single charge.

(iv) The Army, which was at the forefront of the outbreak, was thoroughly reorganised and British military policy came to be dominated by the idea of "division and counterpoise".

(v) Racial hatred and suspicion between the Indians and the English was aggravated.

## **Views**

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the so-called First National War of Independence of 1857 is neither First, not National, nor War of Independence.

R.C. Majumdar, The Mutiny became a Revolt and assumed a political character when the mutineers of Meerut placed themselves under the king of Delhi a section of the landed aristocracy and civil population decided in his favour. What began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence. S.N. Sen had a single leader of ability arisen among them (the rebels), we must have been lost beyond redemption. John Lawrence, The revolt of 1857 was a struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign imperialism as well as indigenous landlordism.

Here lay the woman who was the only man among the rebels.

Hugh Rose (a tribute to the Rani of Jhansi from the man who defeated her)

It was far more than a mutiny, yet much less than a first war of independence.

### **Summary**

Revolt—a product of character and policies of colonial rule.

### **Economic causes—**

Heavy taxation under new revenue settlement,

Summary evictions,

Discriminatory tariff policy against Indian products, Destruction of traditional handicrafts industry, and

Absence of concomitant industrialisation on modern lines that hit peasants, artisans and small zamindars.

### **Political causes—**

Greedy policy of aggrandisement,

Absentee sovereignty character of British rule,

British interference in socio-religious affairs of Indian public.

### **Military causes—**

Discontent among sepoys for economic, Psychological and religious reasons, Coupled with a long history of revolts.

### **CENTRES OF REVOLT AND LEADERS**

**Delhi** - General Khan **Kanpur** - Nana Saheb **Lucknow** - Begum Hazrat Mahal **Bareilly**  
- Khan Bahadur **Bihar** - Kunwar Singh **Faizabad** - Maulvi Ahmadullah **Jhansi** - Rani  
Laxmibai

### **THE BRITISH RESISTANCE**

Delhi -- John Nicholson, Kanpur Lucknow Jhansi Benaras - Lieutenant Willoughby,  
Lieutenant Hudson - Sir Hugh Wheeler, Sir Colin Campbell - Henry Lawrence, Brigadier  
Inglis, Henry Havelock, James Outram, Sir Colin Campbell - Sir Hugh Rose -Colonel  
James Neill

### **CAUSES OF FAILURE**

Limited territorial and social base.

Crucial support of certain sections of Indian public to British authorities.

Lack of resources as compared to those of the British. Lack of coordination and a central leadership.

Lack of a coherent ideology and a political perspective.

### **NATURE**

Not quite the first war of independence but sowed the seeds of nationalism and quest for freedom from alien rule.

### **EFFECT**

Crown took over.

Company rule abolished.