

The Uprising of 1857

The Uprising of 1857 (also known as the Indian Mutiny) was a watershed event in the history of British India. It was by far the largest, most widespread, and dangerous threat to British rule in India in the nineteenth century.

One of its most obvious repercussions was the elimination of the ruling East India Company and the transfer of control of India to the British Crown. As a military crisis of truly massive proportions, the Rebellion also inspired the structural transformation of both the British and Indian armies.

In Britain, the crisis resulted in the amalgamation of the East India Company's European forces into the line, and the commitment of a permanent, 80,000-man garrison on the subcontinent. In India, the uprising or disbandment of sixty-nine out of the seventy-four regiments of the Bengal army necessitated its entire reconstruction with men as different in origin as possible from those who had so recently rebelled.

The Uprising, however, was much more than a military crisis. In north-central India—especially around Awadh (Oudh)—mass peasant uprisings accompanied the military rebellions, thus demonstrating the existence of broad-based antipathy to British administrative and economic policies there.

In addition, the Rebellion generated unprecedented interest in Britain, where ordinary citizens followed its events with fascinated horror—a phenomenon that has prompted some historians to call it Britain's first 'national-popular' war.

The Indian uprising brought a lot of changes to the Indian society even though it failed as a revolution for independence. It would be 90 years before the Indians get their independence. The mutiny had both short and long term consequences.

After the mutiny the British realized they had to take more control, therefore they abolished the East India Company, brought the Mughal Empire to an end and declared Queen Victoria the ruler of India.

This meant that Britain took over all territories owned by the East India Company. Then negotiations with the princes started and Britain tried to get all provinces under indirect control. The relationship between the Indians and the queen was considerable warm.

Queen Victoria had a special affection for India and had a personal Indian advisor. The Indian people welcomed the direct rule and in 1877 this led to the Queen announced Empress of India.

Causes of the Revolt

1. Political Causes

Lord Dalhousie was the Governor-General of India till 1848-1856. Under him the British followed an expansionist policy in India. Dalhousie through his policies had added considerable territories to the British Empire in India. The policy of annexation reached its climax when he implemented the policy of Doctrine of Lapse and annexed the Indian states on charges of mis-governance and absence of an heir. In the course of eight years Dalhousie annexed Satara (1848), Sambhalpur (1850), Jhansi (1853), Nagpur (1853), Jaipur (1849) and Bhagat (1850).

2. Economic Causes:

The economic policy of the British adversely affected every section of the Indian society. The British exploited the economic resources of India to their advantage and drained her wealth by crippling the Indian trade and industry.

Under the British, India turned into a colonial economy to serve the British capitalist interests. Indian resources were unabashedly exported to London to promote British industries.

Consequently, the country was reduced to poverty as traditional handicrafts and industries were ruined. Many people were rendered jobless and there was overcrowding in the agrarian sector.

Further the high revenue demand crippled the agrarian sector. Both the peasants and the zamindars were pushed by the British to produce more to appropriate the maximum revenue.

The various revenue settlements were designed to benefit the government and displayed total disregard for the cultivators.

3. Social and Religious Causes:

The British looked down upon the Indians as inferior race and discriminated with them racially at every step. Indians were not allowed at many places such as railway compartments and public places as parks and hotels as these were specially reserved for the Englishmen.

This racial arrogance of the British hurt the Indian masses most and they began to regard the Englishmen as their worst enemies. The attempt to bring about social reforms in India by the British was not liked by the general public.

The social legislations on the evils as sati, infanticide, re-marriage of widows, etc. were considered as interference in the religious matters of Indians about which the Englishmen knew nothing.

The introduction of English education, the propagation of the work of the Christian missionaries and the changing of the Hindu law of property with a view to facilitate the conversion of Hindus to Christianity alarmed many orthodox Indians. They feared that these practices would upset the social and religious order of the traditional Indian society.

4. Military Causes:

Dissatisfaction was widespread among the military rank and file under the British. There was great inequality in treatment between the Indian and the British counterparts in terms of salary and other benefits.

There was also a disparity in numbers between the Indian and European troops as the latter numbered far less than the Indians. Majority of the Indian soldiers were sent to Crimea, China and Iran to fight wars of the English.

The Indian soldiers were considered inferior and were ill-treated by high officers. The high ranks in the army were exclusively reserved for the Englishmen and the Indians were deliberately excluded from responsible positions.

What hurt the Indian soldiers most was the prohibition to wear caste and religious marks while serving that amounted to interference in their personal affairs by the British.

The immediate cause of the revolt was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle and the greased cartridge. In loading the rifle, the sepoy before inserting the cartridge had to bite off its top. It was believed that the grease was made out of the fats of cows and pigs.

This was objectionable to the Hindus and Muslims alike. This rumour sparked off fire of discontent against the British in the form of the revolt. The first sign of unrest appeared in 1857 at Barrackpore in Bengal. A sepoy, Mangal Pandey on 29th March 1857, killed senior officers on parade and started the revolt.

End of the Revolt

The British government came out with all the powers to suppress the revolt. The sepoys fought the battle with their limited strength for four months. Then, the sepoys had to retreat.

On 25th September British troops regained Delhi. Bahadur Shah was arrested. Nana Saheb lost the battle of Kanpur. His commander Tantia Topi continued the fight up to April, 1859 ACE. and surrendered to the British force.

Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi lost her life in the battle-ground. Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan of Bihar, Bahadur Khan, Moulavi Ahmed of Faizabad lost their lives one after the other. By the end of 1859 ACE. the British power was reestablished in troubled areas.

Reason of failure of the revolt

There were several reasons behind the failure of this revolt.

1. There was no central organization of the sepoys. There was no unified action also. Bahadur Shah, Nana Saheb, Lakshmi Bai, no one had acceptance as a real leader. They had different goals and times again they had contradictions.
2. The British had a huge number of forces. New groups of soldiers were sent to India after the end of Crimean war. Fresh army men came from Singapore. As a result of these, in the middle of the revolt the strength of the British force was doubled. The chance of a win became remote.
3. The sepoys had no improved arms with them. On the other hand, the British force had huge and improved armory. They could not match improved guns and rifles with their old model musket, spears and sword. So, the defeat was almost certain.
4. Further the leaders of this revolt could not get the support of several native states like Holker, Scindia and Rajput sardars and kings. They supported the British. Educated middle-class people also were behind the British power.

Results of the 1857 Revolt:

The 1857 revolt though failed and crushed by the superior military force of the British was a significant event of far-reaching consequences in the history of British rule in India. It marks the end of an era of mercantile capitalism and early colonial rule and the beginning of direct imperial hegemony of the British

crown. While in the first century, i.e., from 1757 to 1857, the British crown indirectly ruled India, in the second century, i.e., from 1858 to 1947, the British crown directly ruled India through the Viceroy appointed by the Monarch.

The results of the 1857 revolt may be subdivided as:

- (i) Constitutional changes,
- (ii) Changes in the army,
- (iii) Religious, judicial and diplomatic effects, and
- (iv) Social effects.

Constitutional Changes:

The most significant result of the mutiny was the transfer of power from a trading company to a sovereign power of Britain by the Government of India Act of 1858. This Act of 1858 completed the process initiated by the Charter Act of 1853. In the place of the President of the Board of Control, the Secretary of State for India was appointed. The Secretary of State for India was assisted and helped by a 15-member body of India Council. Out of the fifteen, eight were appointed by the crown and the rest were to be appointed by the court of the directors.

The designation of the Governor General of India was changed to Viceroy. In case of the rulers of the Indian states, the crown made categorical announcement that all the treaties and agreements entered into by the East India Company will be honoured and respected and made it clear that no renewal was necessary.

The British crown gave up the policy of subordinate isolation and advocated a policy of subordinate union in respect of native states. The administrative apparatus in India was centralized effectively due to the improvement in communications. The British crown reinstated the Taluqdars of Oudh to their old positions. They gave up the idea of the ruthless expansionist policy of their territorial boundaries in and outside India.

Changes in the Army:

Before the revolt of 1857, the army of the British in India was divided into two major divisions – king's forces and company's troops. As a result of the revolt the two forces were united and called king's forces and one-third of it should consist of the Europeans.

The artillery section was exclusively kept under the British. As a consequence of more European soldiers in the army, the expenditure on the army doubled up. The Bengal Army was virtually abolished. They reduced the Brahmins from the army and recruited Gurkhas, Sikhs, Jats and Rajputs of the Punjab.

Religionist, Judicial and Diplomatic Effects:

Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1 November, 1858 guaranteed freedom of faith and equal treatment to all Indians. The Queen made it clear that there was to be no distinction between one individual and another on the pretext of race, religion, sex and creed.

The British crown agreed to provide employment to the Indians in the bureaucratic structure of the times, which was denied previously. In the sphere of judiciary, the Sadar courts and Crown's Supreme Court were amalgamated into High Courts which were established in the presidency towns of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. In the sphere of diplomatic ties between India and Britain, now there was a change and the British began to show greater interest in the internal development of India than in foreign affairs.

Social Effects:

In the sphere of social relations, the gulf between the Europeans and the Indians not only widened but animosity and hatred between the two social groups became marked, and there was definite social estrangement between Indians and Europeans.

Detestation, contempt, ferocity and vengeance became marked features of the British in India in the post-mutiny period. The Indians too did not lag behind in maintaining social distance. What we notice in this period was abandonment of social and educational welfare measures by the British purposefully and willingly.

As if it is not sufficient, orthodoxy, religious superstitions, communal, caste and religious discrimination began to be practiced by the Indians. The British who were quite aloof in the beginning realized their mistake and changed their policy with 1861 Indian Council Act.

A very disturbing feature of post-mutiny period in India was the growth of social distance between the Hindus and Muslims which ultimately led to communalization of social life and partition of India on communal lines.

The post-mutiny period also witnessed setback to Muslim renaissance and efforts of modernity. At the end, we may conclude by agreeing with Tarachand: "imperialist Britain treated India as a satellite whose main function was to sweat and labour for the master, to sub-serve its economy and to enhance the glory and prestige of the empire".