

14. THE REVOLT OF 1857

GENERAL SURVEY

There was no aspect of public life which was untouched or unexploited by the colonial power. It completely disrupted the traditional economy. The colonial regime hurt the religious sentiments of both the Hindus and Muslims in India and activities of Christian missionaries created suspicion. Politically, the arrogance and dictatorial attitude of Lord Dalhousie and his predecessors shocked the traditional rulers of the country. His policy of annexation sent a wave of resentment over the country. The annexation of Awadh for misgovernment was the most dangerous step which put the government in bad faith. The conditions of Indian sepoys, employed in the British army, were heinous and unbearable. Slightest pretext was enough to play havoc, and this was supplied by the introduction of greased cartridges. The greased cartridges alone would not have, however, sufficed to provoke such an explosion, there was a mix of political, social, economic as well as religious factors.

The Revolt began and spread like wild fire through most of north India. It was put down only after severe military operations. The important incidents were:

- the siege of Delhi and its recovery by the British force in late September,
- the military operations around Kanpur and Lucknow and;
- the central Indian campaign in 1858 of Tantia Tope and the Rani of Jhansi.

In these events, several native Princes, Sikhs and certain other sections supported British operations. Besides, Deccan and south India was largely passive. It was fought with great ferocity on both sides, and reprisals were often savage.

There is also a general controversy on the nature and character of the revolt. Like - whether it was just a mutiny as the British called it or the first national war of Indian Independence as characterized by nationalist historians; whether it was a spontaneous outburst of sepoy discontent or an organized and premeditated

revolt; whether it was limited to the army or was it a popular rebellion.

However, the revolt of 1857 was the first and the most severe outburst of anger and discontent accumulated in the hearts of Indian people ever since the advent of British following the Battles of Plassey and Buxar. Though the apologists of imperialism dubbed it as a 'Sepoy Mutiny', the Indian historians have praised it as the 'First War of Indian Independence'. In the words of Nehru: "It was much more than a military mutiny and it rapidly spread and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian independence".

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Causes of the Revolt of 1857

It is in the very nature of colonial rule to exploit the conquered land. To quote Lenin: "There is no end to the violence and plunder which is called British rule in India". When the English established their authority through dual 'government' in Bengal, the financial bleeding of India began. Introduction of Permanent Settlement, huge and revenue assessment, burden of debt. The legal system, over-crowding and pressure on agriculture (due to de-industrialization) all led to the stagnation and determination of the peasants thus alienating them from the British. The machine-made cotton goods from England ruined the weavers. In fact, India underwent a commercial transformation and not an industrial revolution. Introduction of England and change in the nature of administration deprived the middle and upper classes of highly-paid posts. Those who enjoyed the power and privilege under the patronage of Indian States were now crumbled and crushed by the mighty British army.

The British Company confiscated a number of Jagirs from landlords and talukdars, especially from Awadh (this shows why the revolt was so strong in this province). Even in the Deccan, the Inam Commission at Bombay, appointed by Lord Dalhousie, confiscated some 20,000 estates in the early fifties of the 19th century. Following the annexation of native states,



thousands of soldiers serving them became jobless. For instance, as many as 60,000 families lost their livelihood when Awadh's army was disbanded. Even religious preachers, pandits and moulvis were divested of their livelihood with the extinction of native kingdoms. Thus peasants, artisans, and a large number of traditional zamindars and chiefs were seething with anger and were seeking an opportunity to strike at the new regime which had deprived them of their traditional hold and livelihood.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND ECONOMIC CAUSES

- Annexation of Indian states deprived the Indian aristocracy of the power and position which they were enjoying earlier. Under the British rule all High Posts were reserved for the Europeans.
- New land revenue settlements made by the East India Company in the newly-annexed states drove poverty in the ranks of aristocracy and the peasants were the worst affected class due to the heavy assessments and ruthless manner of collection.
- The East India Company destroyed Indian handicraft and industry by using its power and made Indian industry an appendage of a foreign exploitative system.
- Further, the Indian Handicraft and Industry was adversely affected due to the loss of its consumers in the country in the form of princes and aristocrats.

The new regime created suspicion among the Indians that they would be converted to Christianity. The activities of Christian missionaries and establishments of Chaplains and Churches strengthened this fear. The religious sentiments of the people were further hurt when a tax was levied on property held by temples and mosques. An Act was passed in 1856 called the 'General Services Enlistment Act'. which imposed on the Indian sepoys the obligation to serve wherever required. They dreaded sea voyage and considered this measure to be against their religious customs. By passing the Convert Inheritance Act in 1850, the British made no secret of Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, the abolition of the practices like Sati and infanticide and even the introduction of railways and the telegraph were viewed by the conservative sections

of Indian society as an attack on their time-honoured customs and practices. The people at large were alarmed at the rapid spread of English education and Western civilization.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CAUSES

- Like every conqueror, English rulers of India were rude and arrogant towards the subjects and described the Hindus as barbarians with hardly any trait of culture and civilization, while the Muslims were dubbed as bigots, cruel and faithless.
- There was discrimination on the basis of religion in the administration and Judiciary between the Indian and Europeans.
- Indians were called as 'nigger' and 'Suar'.
- In the Religions Disabilities Act of 1850, provision was made that change of religion did not debar a son from inheriting the property of his father. This was seen by the Indians as an act of conversion to Christianity.
- Further, strange rumours were current in India that Lord Canning is specially charged to convert Indians into Christianity.
- Activities of Christian padres and Bethune towards woman education made Indians feel that through education, the British were going to conquer their civilization.

The Indians were considered no better than the drawers of water and hewers of wood'. The foreignness of British was exposed by its treatment of Indians who were subjected to the racial prejudices of the Englishmen. The latter took pleasure in calling Indian the creatures of an inferior breed, 'half Negro'. Dr. Majumdar points out the mood of the Indians when he says: "The impurity with which the members of the royal race could insult, humiliate, injure and even kill the Indian subjects was far more galling to the people than their political or even the more material losses they suffered at the hands of the British."

A wave of resentment rocked the country as a sequel to Lord Dalhousie's policy of annexation. Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II, was refused the pension which his father had been getting. Rani Laxmi Bai was not allowed to install her



adopted son on the throne after the death of her husband (1853). Nagpur met the same fate. The abolition of titles of the Nawab of Carnatic and the Raja of Travancore was rude shock to the native princes. The house of the Mughals was humiliated when Lord Dalhousie announced in 1849 that the successors of Bahadur Shah Zafar would not be allowed to use the historic Red Fort which is their Palace and must move to a place near the Qutub Minar. To add insult to injury, Lord Canning announced in 1856 that after the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar, his successor would not be allowed to use the title of king. Awadh was annexed to the Company's dominions in 1856 without satisfactory reason, although its ruler had always been faithful to the British Government (in fact, it was the immense potential of Awadh as a market of Manchester goods that prompted the imperialists to annex it).

The impression regarding the invincibility of the British army was shattered when they were badly beaten in the First Afghan War, the Anglo-Sindh wars and the Santhal rebellion.

The Indian soldiers who became the ladder for the Britishers to climb to the paramountcy were looked down upon as inferiors by their superiors. They were poorly paid, ill-fed and badly housed. Indian soldiers, formerly occupying high positions in the armies of native princes, could not rise above the rank of Risaldar or Subedar. They were grievously shocked when they were deprived even of their foreign service allowance.

POLITICAL CAUSES

- Lord Dalhousie annexed Punjab, Pegu and Sikkim by the right to conquest.
- Satara, Jaitpur, Sambhalpur, Baghat, Udaipur, Jhansi and Nagpur were annexed by the application of the Doctrine of Lapse.
- Awadh was the only state which was annexed on the pretext of the 'mis-governance'.
- The Regal titles of the Nawabs of Carnatic and Tanjore were abolished.
- The Pension of Peshwa Baji Rao II's adopted son called Nana Saheb was stopped.
- Lord Canning declared that the next Mughal prince would have to renounce the regal title and

the ancestral Mughal palaces, this greatly angered the Muslims.

- The Indians held that the existence of all states was threatened and absorption of all states was a question of time.
- The annexation of Baghat and Udaipur was cancelled and they were restored to their rulers.
- When Dalhousie wanted to apply Doctrine of lapse to Karauli (Rajputana), he was overruled by the Court of Directors.

They groused when they were required to go to strange and distant countries. The Bengal army consisted of Hindu sepoy of high caste who disliked menial services and dreaded sea voyage which, they believed, endangered their caste. Their discontent was expressed on many occasions before the Revolt of 1857 also. The pent-up emotions of the Indian sepoy burst forth in 1856 when they were ordered to use the new Enfield Rifles. The cartridges of which were greased with the fat of cows and pigs. The sepoy had to remove the greased covers of the cartridges with their teeth before loading them into the rifles. Both Hindu and Muslim sepoy refused to use these cartridges and felt that the English were defiling their religions. The issue of cartridges fell on the already existing grievances as spark on dry timber and very soon the whole country from the Sutlej to the Narmada was ablaze.

MILITARY CAUSES

- Three-fifth of the recruits of the Bengal Army was drawn from Awadh and North-Western province and most of them came from high castes such as Brahmins and Rajputs who were averse to accepting that part of the army discipline which treated them on par with the low caste recruits.
- Since most of the recruits in Army were from Awadh, the annexation of Awadh on the pretext of mal-administration marked the rebellion mood in the army.
- In 1856, Lord Canning's government passed the General Service Enlistment Act which declared that all future recruits for the Bengal Army would have to give an undertaking to serve anywhere even outside India. This was considered by the caste Hindus as defiling of their religion because



going oversea was considered by the Hindu's as being polluted religiously.

- By the passing of the Post Office Act of 1854, the privilege of free postage, so long enjoyed by the sepoys, was withdrawn.
- In 1856, the Government decided to replace the old-fashioned musket "Brown Bess" by the "Enfield rifle". The loading process of the Enfield rifle involved bringing the cartridge to the mouth and biting off the top paper with mouth.

In February 1857, the 19th Native Infantry at Berhampur refused to use the cartridges but, before the tide could turn against the British, it was disbanded. In March 1857, Mangal Pande, a young officer of 34th N.I. at Barrackpur wounded his officer, an Englishman. He was hanged and even this unit was disbanded. This news travelled to Meerut cantonment. In May 1857, when the new cartridges were issued to 90 Indians in Meerut, 85 of them refused to use them. These 85 soldiers were court-martialled and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. After a few days the excited cavalrymen attacked the jail where the 85 persons were imprisoned. The sky was rent with deafening shouts of 'Maro Firangee Ko'. The same night the mutineers marched to Delhi and thousand able-bodied civilians also joined them.

The British Garrison at Delhi could not resist the rebels and consequently fell into their hands. The Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, joined the revolutionaries after initial vacillations and was proclaimed Emperor of India. Here, the mutineers were headed by General Bakht Khan, the person responsible for leading the Bareilly troops to Delhi. The loss of Delhi lowered the prestige of the British in India. To retrieve their prestige they put everything at stake and Sir John Lawrence sent a strong British contingent under John Nicholson. After a long siege of four months, the British were able to recover Delhi in September 1857. Bhadur Shah II was captured at the tomb of Humayun. Two of his sons and a grandson were shot in cold blood before his eyes. The emperor was deported to Rangoon where he died in the year 1862. The other highlights were the operations around Kanpur, Lucknow, Gwalior, Jhansi, Bihar and Faizabad.

The tide of revolt touched its zenith in Awadh where the common people the taluqdars to help the dispossessed Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah. General Collin Campbell himself marched towards Lucknow at the head of English and Gorkha soldiers. Finally, Lucknow fell into the hands of the British after a fierce battle in March 1858.

Sir Hugh Rosled the British forces against the rebels in central India. The Rani of Jhansi was holding out with the help of Tantia Tope. Jhansi was taken by heavy attack in April 1858, but Rani Lakhshmi Bai slipped away and managed to occupy the stronghold of Gwalior. Finally, the Rani; 'the best and bravest' of the rebel leaders, as Sir Hugh Rose described her, fell fighting in June and Gwalior fell into the hands of the English. Tantia Tope carried on a guerrilla campaign in the traditional Maratha fashion with great skill until April 1859 when he was caught and hanged.

In Bihar, the revolt was led by Kunwar Singh, a Zamindar of Jagdishpur, who played a dominant part in the revolt despite his old age. He fought the British in Bihar and then joined Nana Sahib's forces and took part in various encounters with the English in Awadh and central India. He died in April 1858 leaving behind a glorious record of valour and bravery.

Maulvi Ahmadullah, a native of Madras, led the revolt at Faizabad. The Muslim community under his command took part in various battles in Awadh and Rohilkhand. He was, however treacherously killed.

At Kanpur, the struggle was led by Nana Sahib. The British commander Hugh Wheeler, finding the odds heavy against him, surrendered in June 1857. Only with the arrival of a large force under General Havelock was Kanpur recaptured after defeating Nana Sahib in a hotly contested battle in June 1858. In the meantime, Tantia Tope was successful in winning over the troops at Shivajinagar and Moral by appealing to their sense of patriotism. With the concerted strength of these troops, Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope recaptured Kanpur in November 1858. But this was only a short term victory. The British under Campbell, won a decisive victory against the force of Nana Sahib in a battle. Nana Sahib fled toward Nepal where he probably died after sometime.



Officers

John Nicholson
Havelok, Outram
& Sri Colion Campbell
Sir Colin Campbell
Sir Hugh Rose
Col Neill

Leaders

Bahadur Shah Zafar
Nana Saheb
Begum Hazrat Mahal
Khan Bahadur
Rani Laxmibai
Kunwar Singh
Maulvi Ahmadullah
Tantia Tope

Places where they suppressed rebellion

Delhi
Lucknow

Kanpur
Jhansi
Banaras

Their fate after the revolt

Imprisoned and deported to Rangoon where he died natural death.
Fled to Nepal
Fled to Nepal
Died Fighting
Died Fighting
Died Fighting
Died Fighting
Treacherously Murdered in the forest of central india.

By mid-1853 the revolt was violently crushed. It is not necessary to follow the complicated operations of the British to put down the Great Revolt. But it can be said that it was a popular revolt in north India, as was evidenced by the British operations against entire villages in almost all the places where the uprising took place.

Nature of Revolt: Divergent views

Divergent opinions have been expressed regarding the nature or the great out break of 1857. These views may be broadly divided into two categories. One section considers it as primarily a mutiny of sepoys though in certain areas it drifted into a revolt of the people. The other category expresses a feeling that the revolt was really a rebellion of the people rather than merely a mutiny of the soldiers and goes further to state that it was indeed the first war of Indian independence. Both these views need a detailed examination before coming to a conclusion.

After much uneasy and unconvincing argument, British historians, anxious to minimize Indian grievances and to preserve the good faith of their country, for many years insisted that the rising was nothing more than a sepoy mutiny. They viewed it as a wholly unpatriotic and selfish attempt with no native leadership and no popular support. The main pillars of

this comforting belief were that the Sikhs remained loyal and that the native states which had escaped annexation were mostly neutral. The British concentrated on the greased cartridges, the activities of the rebellious sepoys, and the British campaigns of 1857-58. The civil unrest which accompanied the mutiny was made to look insignificant or ignored altogether. But the popular participation in the revolt is an open secret. The speed with which it spread and the swelling mass sympathies cannot be ignored in characterizing the revolt. The fact that the British army burnt and massacred villages in large numbers shows how popular the revolt was.

Indians, generally speaking, subscribe to the view of V.D. Savarkar who called it the 'First War of Indian Independence'. But a general revolt or a war of independence necessarily implies definite plan and organization. The circumstances, under which Bahadur Shah, Nana Saheb, Rani Lakshmi and other cast in their lot, with the mutinous sepoys, were rebelling, are sufficient to expose the limitations of the theory that it was a struggle for independence. All the leaders had their own axes to grind. Bahadur Shah's association with the rebels was half-hearted. Rani Lakshmi of Jhansi offered to stop her resistance if her adopted son was recognized as the legal heir to the throne.



The sudden and unexpected way in which the unity spread across the country has always excited the suspicion that it must have been planned in advance. Many Englishmen could, in fact find no explanation for this baffling outbreak other than deliberate conspiracy. The wide circulations of chapattis just before the outbreak of 1857 is regarded by many as an important evidence in favour of an organized

conspiracy. But this mysterious circulation of chapattis in the villages of northern India does not provide any satisfactory explanation. The chapattis apparently meant differently to different people and to many signified nothing at all. Thus, it will be totally misleading to say that the revolt was the result of careful and secret organization.

Western Historians

Sir John Lawrence and Seeley

L.E.R. Rees

T.R. Holmes

Sri James Outram

W. Taylor" It was a Mohammedan

Benjamin Disraeli

Prof. Stanley Wolpert

Their Views about the nature of Revolt

"Sepoy's Mutiny"

"A war of fanatic religionists against Christians."

"Conflict between civilization and barbarism."

"A result of Hindu-Muslim conspiracy".

Conspiracy making capital of Hindu grievances."

"A National rising."

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

It would also be a travesty of truth to describe the Revolt of 1857 as a national war of independence. National, it certainly was not, for the upsurge of the people was limited to mainly North India. Moreover, nationalism of the modern type was yet to come. No leader of the revolt had even the slightest idea of what sort of power should replace British authority once it was overthrown. Moreover, in this violent upheaval, the civil participants were not so much against the political supremacy of British as against the whole new order of things which they were importing into India.

A large section of people, in fact, actively cooperated with British during the revolt. Thus it can be said that the so-called first war of independence was neither first nor national nor a war of independence. It was definitely something more than a sepoy mutiny but something less than a national revolt. It took place everywhere in the name of one sovereign and under one flag. The rapidity with which the revolt progressed and the vast area over which it spread proves that it enjoyed, in that area at least, strong mass support.

Modern Indian Historians

V.D. Sararkar

R.C. Majumdar

Dr. S.N. Sen

Dr. S.B. Chaudhary

Their views about the Revolt

"A planned war of National Independence."

"Neither first nor National nor War of Independence."

"What began as mutiny ended as a war of Independence."

"Revolt of 1857 can be bifurcated into two sub-divisions; mutiny and rebellion."

Religious flavour: The war was fought as much for Swadharma as against the discontentment. Religious grievances formed an important ingredient of the dynamite that caused the explosion. A 'maulvi' and a 'pundit' used to be attached to every regiment to minister to the spiritual needs of the men. Fakirs (beggars) are reported to have played an important part

in the espionage services of the rebels. Though religious feelings strengthened the courage and composure of the rebels, it did not make them fanatical. Religion heightened the appeal of the revolt but its content remained predominantly political. Its leaders were temporal, not spiritual, spokesmen of society.



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Was it backward looking?

The revolt reflected the social ethos of the time. It was infused with traditional as well modernist ideas. Any assessment of its character must carefully review this duality at its core. This revolution, however, was an attempt to return to the earlier and traditional relation in rejecting the new classes who had supplanted them, the old and traditional ruling classes were assisted by their former subjects. In fact, it can be said that it was the decaying reactionary element, the discontented princes and feudal forces, which led the opposition. They were joined by common people who were groaning under the burden of over taxation, rack-renting and social humiliation. The revolt was thus a feudal upheaval.

Failure of the Revolt

Lack of planning, organization and leadership were some of the most important causes for the failure of the revolt. The leaders had no clear cut plans and targets. The movement lacked a leader who could command obedience from all and put up a concerted action. The leaders of the revolt could never agree on a common plan. They were mutually jealous and continually intrigued against one another. In fact, these personal jealousies and intrigues were largely responsible for the Indian defeat.

It was a tragedy that some of the princes helped the British to suppress a bid for freedom by their compatriots. Sikh princes of Nabha, Patiala and Kapurthala and the rulers of Hyderabad and Gwalior openly helped the British with men and money. Holkar and Sindhia remained loyal to the British. Regarding Sindhia's help, General Innes says: "His loyalty saved India for the British".

The money lenders (who were the targets of attack by the villagers) and educated Indians (who thought that the British would destroy the feudal forces) also did support the revolt. Besides, Bombay, Madras, Bengal, Rajputana and western Punjab did not participate in the revolt.

The superior resources of the British in men, money and materials, their control over the seas, better means of communication at their command and the help from the natives put them definitely in an advantageous position.

Reasons of Failure

- The Revolt of 1857 was limited to the areas of Awadh, Rohilkhand, Delhi, Kanpur, Western Bihar and some portion of Central India. A large part of country remained not only unaffected, but also helped in suppression of the revolt.
- A large section of society, particularly the middle class intelligentsia and barring the peasantry class of Oudh the peasants as well as the lower castes were totally kept away from the revolt.
- The Superior weapons and better discipline in the British Army and use of Electric telegraph was far advanced against the old-fashioned and traditional weapons of Indian soldiers.
- The Revolt was ill-organized.
- Indians had no match to the exceptional military leader's the East India Company had in the form of Lawrence, Nicholson, Outram, Havelok and Edwards.

Significance

It was a glorious landmark in in history in as much as Hindus and Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder against a common enemy. Though the revolt was unsuccessful, the spirit of the people remained unshaken. The revolt left an indelible impression on the minds of the Indian people and thus paved the way for the rise of a strong national movement. In the words of Dr. Majumdar - 'It has been said that Julius Caesar when dead was more powerful than when he was alive. The same thing may be said about the revolt of 1857. Whatever might have been its original character, it soon became a symbol of challenge to the mighty British power in India. It remained a shining example before the nascent nationalism in India in its struggle for freedom from the British yoke'

After the revolt of 1857, the British rule in India underwent major transformation in its policy. It started protecting and fostering the princes as its puppets. The reactionary social and religious survivals were jealously guarded and preserved against the demands of progressive Indian opinion for their reform. After initial harsh treatment of Muslims, the rulers started talking for the betterment of the Muslim subjects. Realising that Hindu-Muslim unity would pose a serious danger



to them, the British re-employed the policy of “Divide and Rule”

Impact of the Revolt

- The Administration of the India was transferred from the East India Company to the Crown by the Government of India Act, 1858. The Act of 1858 provided for the appointment of a Secretary of State for India, who was to be assisted by an Advisory Council of Fifteen. Eight members are to be nominated by the Crown and seven members are to be selected by the Court of Directors.
- The Queen’s announcement declared against any desire for extension of territorial possessions and promised to respect the rights, dignity and honour of native princes.
- Indian army was thoroughly re-organized, the strength of European troops in Indian army was increased from the pre-1857 figure of 45,000 to

65,000 and the number of Indian troops reduced from the pre-1857 figure of 238,000 to 140,000. All higher posts in the army and police were reserved for Europeans.

Direct consequence: The direct result of the revolt was the end of the Company’s rule and the passing of the responsibility of the Indian administration of British India into the hands of the British Queen and the Parliament. The Board of Control was abolished and the Board of Directors was done away with. An Office of Secretary of State for India with a 15-member council was constituted for the administration of India. The designation of the Governor-General was changed to Viceroy. While he remained Governor General for the provinces under his rule, he came to be known as Viceroy while dealing with Nawab, Rajas and native princes. The army was reorganized thoroughly. The economic exploitation of India became more serious and much wider.

