

THE FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, 1857: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

The Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 was one of the first wars of Indian independence against the British. This revolt can aptly be termed the first war of Indian independence against the British. Kings, peasants, tribal, landlords and we sepoys, all were dissatisfied with the British rule.

The start of the revolt was on the 29th of March, 1857, when Mangal Pandey, attacked his officers. The attack by Mangal Pandey is considered one of the first acts of what came to be known as the Great Rebellion or the Sepoy Mutiny.

The sepoys wanted an end to the British rule and make Bahadur Shah Zafar their leader. In Delhi, sepoys killed many British officers, confiscated their ammunition and set their buildings on fire. A week after the British were evicted from Delhi, a wave of mutinies began in different parts of the country. More and more regiments rebelled and joined other troops at nodal places like Kanpur, Delhi and Lucknow.

Near Kanpur, Nana Saheb and in Lucknow, Birjis Qadar and his mother Begum Hazrat Mahal, contributed a lot to the uprising. Birjis Qadar was the son of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. In Jhansi, Rani Lakshmibai, Tantia Tope and the sepoys together fought against the British. The mutiny saw the emergence of many new leaders like Ahmadullah Shah from Faizabad, Bakht Khan from Bareilly and Kunwar Singh, from

Bihar.

The revolt scared the British and shook the very foundation of their rule in India.

Causes of the Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857, the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the Uprising of 1857, the Great Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, the Sepoy Mutiny, are the different names for India's First War of Independence against the British.

The policies and laws introduced by the Company created discontentment among the rulers, landlords, peasants, tribals and sepoys and all wanted an end to the colonial rule. The Company appointed Residents who were meant to intervene in the affairs of the states.

The Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie, was used to annex many Indian states like Satara, Sambalpur, Udaipur, Jhansi and Nagpur. The subsidiary alliance policy was used to forcefully annex Awadh.

The Company hence planned to bring an end to the Mughal dynasty. It stopped minting the name of the Mughal king on its coins, and declared that Bahadur Shah Zafar would be the last Mughal king. The land revenue systems introduced made the lives of the peasants and the zamindars miserable. Huge

taxes were levied forcing the peasants to borrow money from moneylenders, who seized their lands if they failed to pay back the loan.

The British also brought in many reforms in Indian society. They encouraged widow remarriage, stopped the evil practice of sati and gave importance to English-language education.

In 1850, a law was passed that made it easier to convert to Christianity. Those who converted were allowed to inherit the property of their ancestors. The sepoys were also dissatisfied by the Company's rule and were unhappy with the conditions of their service, pay and allowances.

All these reforms stifled the Indians, and they felt that their traditions, customs and religions were being destroyed.

Some of the rules that the Company introduced were also against their religious sentiments. The cartridges by sepoys to be used were greased with the fat of pigs and cows, which was against their religion. This was the trigger that unified the sepoys for the Revolt of 1857.

Retaliation by the Company

The Great Rebellion, in May 1857 as a mutiny of the sepoys in Meerut, erupted into civilian revolts and smaller mutinies in central India and the upper Gangetic Plains. The scale of the Revolt of 1857 intimidated the Company, and it decided to

use all its might to repress it.

The scale of the upheaval frightened the Company, and it began to strengthen its military by bringing in men and material from England and passing new laws to convict the rebels easily. In September 1857, the Company recaptured Delhi, and in October, Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was captured and sentenced to life imprisonment.

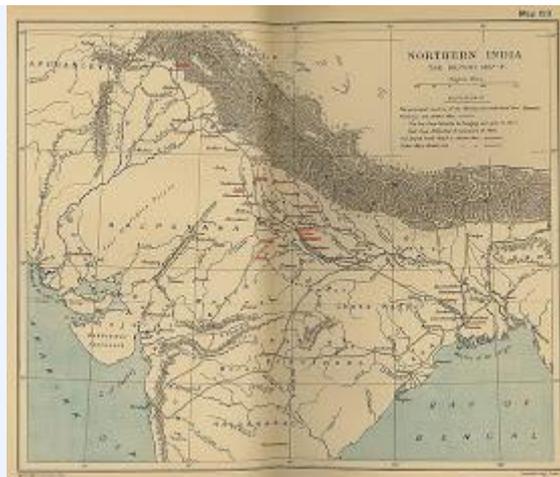
In March 1858, the Company recaptured Lucknow, and in June, Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi was killed. Tantia Tope was killed in April 1859. Hundreds of rebels, nawabs, sepoys, kings and civilians were tried and executed by the British.

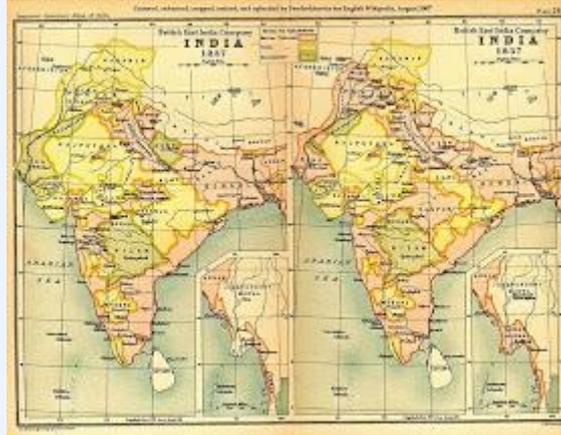
By the end of 1859, the Company regained its control over India. According to a new act in 1858, the ruling powers of India were transferred to the British Crown. The Governor-General of India was given the title of Viceroy, who was a representative of the Crown. The British annulled the policy of Doctrine of Lapse and recognized the right of an adopted son. They also decided to increase the proportion of European soldiers in the army.

The British held the Muslims responsible for the revolt, and so confiscated their property and treated them with hostility. The revolt also made the British respect the traditions and religions practised in India. They framed policies to protect the land rights of zamindars.

Political Causes:

The annexation policy of British was one of the major causes. The terms of the Subsidiary treaties signed by Wellesley with different rulers were never honoured unless it suited the British interests. The Doctrine of Lapse introduced by Dalhousie led to the outright annexation of eight states. Nana Saheb lost his pension. Rani of Jhansi was not permitted to adopt a son. They turned against the British. They were the most able leaders of the revolt. The annexation of Oudh and deposition of its ruler Wazid Ali Shah, made Oudh the most prominent centre of the revolt. Bahadur Shah II, the Mughal Emperor and his successors were humiliated by the British. They were prohibited from using their ancestral palace, the Red Fort, in future. Besides, the Muslims were in general dissatisfied with the British. They felt that they had lost their political power. Lakhs of soldiers employed by the dethroned princes became unemployed.





Administrative Causes:

The Indians disliked and distrusted the administration of the British. For example, the replacement of Persian language by English as the court language was not liked by the people. The judicial system of the British was costly, mechanical and involved much time. The poor could draw no advantage from it. The rich disliked it because they could be brought to trial even by appeals of the common men who had been subservient to them for centuries. The police system of the British was not effective by that time. The people always felt insecure of their property, life and honour. The most affected part of British administration was the revenue system. Under the British the peasants and the landlords suffered equally. The peasants had to pay heavy revenue taxes. The landlords were devoid of their special privileges. The British excluded the Indians from all high civil and military jobs. So the educated Indians who expected to get gainful employment in the service of the company were disappointed.

Economic Causes:

The economic exploitation of the country, the huge drain of wealth and the disappearance of the native industries dislocated the economic life of the people in India. The British crippled Indian trade and manufacture. They imposed heavy protective duties in Britain while British goods were imported into India at a nominal duty. The machine made British goods flooded the Indian markets and ruined Indian manufacture. With the disappearance of the old aristocratic Zamindars and rulers, the Indian artisans and craftsmen lost their patronage. The Indian weavers and handicraftsmen were forced to work according to the desires of the servants of the company. They in return received very little wages. Naturally they lost their interest. It destroyed the cotton textile industry of India which was the largest and most beneficial industry. Thousands of people who held administrative posts under the Indian rulers were deposed. Loss of employment affected others who were dependent on those employees for their livelihood. Lord Bentinck's resumption of rent-free tenures reduced the landowners to poverty. The English abolished several intermediaries like Jagirdars and Taluqdars. The out-break of seven famines in the first half of the nineteenth century made the economic distress more acute.

Social Causes:

The British regarded the Indians as an inferior race. They exhibited racial arrogance. They showed contempt in their dealing with the Indians. The Indians could not travel in first class train compartments. They were kept away from all social gatherings. They were not allowed to mix up with the English

men. The conservative section of the Indians were alarmed by the rapid spread of Western culture and English education in India. Measures like the suppression of Sati and female infanticide, remarriage of widows and the right of inheritance to Christian converts offended the Indian orthodox sentiments.

Religious Causes:

The Christian missionaries were active in propagating Christianity. These activities created a sense of fear in the minds of the Indians. They suspected that the British were out to destroy their religions and convert India into a Christian land. R.D. Mangles, a member of the British Parliament, declared openly that 'Every British must try his utmost to convert every Indian to Christianity and the banner of Christ should wave triumphant from one end of India to the other. This declaration created a great anger and disbelief against the British rule. Religious sentiments were aroused when the British imposed taxes on the lands belonging to temples and mosques. The priests and the maulvis showed their discontent against the British rule. All these activities made the British unpopular.

Military Causes:

The Indian soldiers were called the Sepoys. They constituted the majority of the British army in India. In fact, the sword of the British power rested on the loyalty and strength of these Indian Sepoys. But they were treated with contempt and made to feel inferior by the British. They were paid less than their British counterparts. The Indian sepoy had no chance of promotion in the army. They were prohibited from their traditional religious practices like wearing a saffron mark on

their forehead, growing beard and wearing turbans. Lord Cannings' Government passed in 1856, "The General Services Enlistment Act". It compelled the Indian Sepoys to serve abroad, if there was need. They had to cross the seas. It made them angry against the British.

Immediate Cause:

There were about 40,000 British soldiers in the army and the number of Indians exceeded two lakhs. This numerical superiority made the sepoy feel that they could easily throw the English out if they acted unitedly. The Sepoys who were discontented by the English policies had a reason to feel alarmed. The immediate cause was the introduction of new



enfield rifles by the British. The cartridges were greased by animal fat. The bullets had thick covering which had to be bitten off before loading. Believing that the fat of cow and pig had been used to grease these cartridges both the Hindu and Muslim sepoy refused to use them. They thought that this would offend their religious tradition because the cow is sacred to the Hindus and the pig is detestable to the Muslims. On 29

March 1857 at Barrackpore, near Kolkata, Mangal Pandey, a young Indian Sepoy from Bengal Regiment, refused to use the greased cartridge, and shot down his sergeant. He was arrested, tried and executed. When this news spread many sepoys started the revolt.

The course of the Revolt:

The Sepoys broke out into open revolt at Meerut in April 1857. They refused to touch the greased cartridges. They were courtmartialled and sentenced to ten years rigorous imprisonment. The regiments in Meerut rose in open revolt on 10 May 1857. They broke and opened the prison. They released the imprisoned soldiers and killed every European they saw, many whites were publicly killed. The revolt spread to Kanpur, Lucknow, Nasirabad, Benaras and Jhansi. Then they marched to Delhi on 11 May and brought it under their control. They proclaimed the reluctant Bahadur Shah II, the old king of Delhi, as the Emperor. Sepoys from other centres too marched to Delhi. When the emperor expressed his inability to pay the salaries to the soldiers, they looted the treasury at Kanpur and other places. They resorted to many violent acts. After a long fight, the English army led by John Nicholson, with the help of Sikh sepoys, reconquered Delhi.

KANPUR INCIDENT:



Nana Saheb

The revolt at Kanpur was led by Nana Saheb, the discontented adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. He declared himself the Peshwar at Kanpur and killed the English who had surrendered to him. But the English led by General Havelock recaptured Kanpur on June 17th 1857. Nana Saheb ran away to Nepal.



A photo of Tantia Topi, said to have been the revolution's best general, after his capture in 1859

The troops of Nana Saheb were led by a loyal and gallant leader Tantia Tope. He recaptured Kanpur but he could not retain it for long. The English laid seige to Jhansi. Tatyya Topey hurried to the place with 20,000 Sepoys but was defeated. He escaped to the forests, a traitor called Mansingh helped the British to arrest him. He was sentenced to death.



1857 Army of Nana Saheb & Tatyya Tope

REVOLT IN LUCKNOW:

In Lucknow, the revolt was directed by Begum Hazrat Mahal of Oudh. The Sepoys and citizens together revolted in Lucknow. The people declared Wajid Ali's son as the Nawab and Hazarat Mahal herself took the administration. Soon the English recaptured Lucknow and the Begum escaped to Nepal.

REVOLT IN MADHYA PRADESH:

In Central India the revolt was guided by Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. She was one of the greatest patriots of India. Dressed in male attire, she fought like a true soldier with unprecedented courage and military skill. She captured Gwalior. The Queen herself took led the army, mounted on the horseback with her adopted son tied to her back. She fought very bravely till she was killed in the battle in June 1858. According to the British historians, present at the time of revolt, Rani Lakshmi Bai was the best and the bravest of the leaders of the Revolt of 1857.

At Bareilly, the capital of Rohilkhand, the Sepoys revolted. They declared a Rohila Chief as the Governor. Kunwar Singh, the 80 year old landlord of Jagdishpur was the most outstanding military leader of Western Bihar. The greatest heroes of the revolt were however, the thousands of sepoys, peasants and the artisans who joined the leaders. They fought valiantly with great courage. In some places the civil population rose in revolt. In fact, the participation of peasants, artisans and general population gave the revolt its real strength. It made the revolt a popular uprising. However, the

revolt failed to succeed due to effective suppression by the British.

Causes for the failure of the Revolt:

Lack of Unity: There was no unity among the rebels. The ideas of nationalism and unity had not yet developed. There was no common purpose among the rebels. The Sepoys of Bengal wanted to revive the medieval glories of the Mughals. Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope tried to re-establish the Maratha power. Rani Lakshmi Bai fought to regain her lost State. Secondly, the revolt was not widespread. It took place only in the Northern and Central parts of India. Even Bombay, the Punjab, Sind, Rajasthan and South India remained quiet. The British managed to get the loyalty of the Sikhs, Afghans and the Gurkha regiments. The Gurkhas actually helped the British in suppressing the revolt.

Lack of Modern Weapons and Techniques: Mere participation or heroism could not match the latest weapons of the British. The sepoys who joined with the civilians could not face the well organised and well disciplined army of the British. The lack of resources both in trained men and money made the rebels to give up the struggle on many occasions. The Telegraphic system and Postal communications helped the British to speed up their operations.

Leadership: There was lack of good leaders on the part of the Indians. There was no organisation and planning. The rebel leaders were no match to the British Generals. Rani Lakshmi Bai, Tantia Tope and Nana Saheb were courageous but they were not good generals.

The sepoys indulged in looting and dacoities, resulted in the common people losing their faith in them.

The English had the common goal of protecting their empire. The sepoys did not have a definite aim, acceptable to all.

Finally the English mastery of the sea enabled them to get timely reinforcement from England.

Results of the Revolt:

1. After the revolt, the English East India Company's rule came to an end,
2. The administration of India was taken over by the British Crown,
3. By a special Act, both the Board of Directors and the Board of control were abolished. In their place the office of the Secretary of State for India was created. He was assisted by an India council of 15 members,
4. The Indian army was thoroughly reorganized and
5. The policy of ruthless conquests in India was given up. The British realized the mistake of antagonising the rulers of the Indian states.

End of East India Company's Rule:

the suppression of the revolt in 1858, a new phase appeared in the history of the British rule in India. There were important changes in the British policy towards India. There were administrative changes also.

Act of 1858 and Queen Victoria's Proclamation:

In August 1858, the British Parliament passed an Act. It put an end to the rule of the East India Company. The British Crown took over the administration. The Governor-General of India was also called as Viceroy. It meant the representative of the Crown. Queen Victoria was the ruler of Britain at that time. A proclamation was issued in her name. Lord Canning, the Governor – General read it out at a Durbar held at Allahabad on 1 November 1858. The Queen's Proclamation is described as the Magna Carta of the Indian people. It assured some privileges to Indians. It confirmed the earlier treaties of East India Company with the Princes. It promised to pay due regard to the ancient traditions and customs of India. The right of adoption was given to the Indian princes. The policy of annexation was ended. The Proclamation declared that all Indians would be eligible to enter the administrative services on the basis of their education and ability, irrespective of race and creed. Unconditional pardon was granted to the rebels except those who had been responsible for the murder of the British during the revolt.