



Revolt of 1857

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The Indian Mutiny of 1857-59 was a widespread but unsuccessful rebellion against the rule of British East India Company in India which functioned as a sovereign power on behalf of the British crown.

The Revolt

- It was the first expression of organised resistance against the British East India Company
- It began as a revolt of the sepoys of the British East India Company's army but eventually secured the participation of the masses.
- The revolt is known by several names: **the Sepoy Mutiny** (by the British Historians), **the Indian Mutiny**, **the Great Rebellion** (by the Indian Historians), **the Revolt of 1857**, **the Indian Insurrection**, and **the First War of Independence** (by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar).

Causes of The Revolt

Political Cause

- **British policy of expansion:** The political causes of the revolt were the British policy of expansion through the **Doctrine of Lapse** and direct annexation.
- A large number of Indian rulers and chiefs were dislodged, thus arousing fear in the minds of other ruling families who apprehended a similar fate.
 - **Rani Lakshmi Bai's** adopted son was not permitted to sit on the throne of Jhansi.
 - Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi were annexed under the **Doctrine of Lapse**.
 - Jaitpur, Sambalpur and Udaipur were also annexed.
 - The annexation of Awadh by Lord Dalhousie on the pretext of maladministration left thousands of nobles, officials, retainers and soldiers jobless. This measure converted Awadh, a loyal state, into a hotbed of discontent and intrigue.

Doctrine of lapse:

- The notable British technique called the **Doctrine of Lapse** was first perpetrated by **Lord Dalhousie** in the late 1840s.
- It involved the British prohibiting a Hindu ruler without a natural heir from adopting a successor and, after the ruler died or abdicated, annexing his land.
- To those problems added the growing discontent of the Brahmans, many of whom had been dispossessed of their revenues or had lost lucrative positions.

Social and Religious Cause

- The rapidly **spreading Western Civilisation** in India was alarming concerns all over the country.
 - An act in 1850 changed the Hindu law of inheritance enabling a Hindu who had converted into Christianity to inherit his ancestral properties.
 - The people were convinced that the Government was planning to **convert Indians to Christianity**.
- The **abolition of practices like sati and female infanticide**, and the legislation legalizing widow remarriage, were believed as threats to the established social structure.
- Introducing **western methods of education** was directly challenging the orthodoxy for Hindus as well as Muslims
- Even the introduction of the railways and telegraph was viewed with suspicion.

Economic Cause

- In rural areas, peasants and zamindars were infuriated by the **heavy taxes on land** and the **stringent methods of revenue collection** followed by the Company.

Many among these groups were unable to meet the heavy revenue demands and repay their loans to money lenders, eventually losing the lands that they had held for generations.
- Large numbers of **sepoys belonged to the peasantry class** and had family ties in villages, so the grievances of the peasants also affected them.
- After the Industrial Revolution in England, there was an **influx of British manufactured goods** into India, which ruined industries, particularly the textile industry of India.

Indian handicraft industries had to compete with cheap machine-made goods from Britain.

Military Causes

- The Revolt of 1857 began as a **sepoy mutiny**:
 - Indian sepoys formed more than 87% of the British troops in India but were considered inferior to British soldiers.
 - An Indian sepoy was paid less than a European sepoy of the same rank.
- They were required to serve in areas far away from their homes.

In 1856 Lord Canning issued the General Services Enlistment Act which required that the sepoys must be ready to serve even in British land across the sea.

Lord Canning

- Charles John Canning was the statesman and governor general of India during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.
- He became the **first viceroy of India** in 1858.
- The important events during his tenure include:
 - The Mutiny of 1857, which he was able to suppress successfully
 - Passing of Indian Councils Act, 1861 which **introduced portfolio system** in India
 - **Withdrawal of “Doctrine of Lapse”** which was one of the main reasons of mutiny of 1858
 - Introduction of Code of Criminal Procedure
 - Enactment of Indian High Courts Act
 - Indian Penal Code (1858)

Immediate Cause

- The Revolt of 1857 eventually broke out over the **incident of greased cartridges**.
 - A rumour spread that the cartridges of the new enfield rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs.
 - Before loading these rifles the sepoys had to bite off the paper on the cartridges.
 - Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys refused to use them.
- Lord Canning tried to make amends for the error and the offending cartridges were withdrawn but the damage had already been done. There was unrest in several places.
- In March 1857, **Mangal Pandey**, a sepoy in **Barrackpore**, had refused to use the cartridge and attacked his senior officers.
 - He was hanged to death on 8th April.
 - On 9th May, 85 soldiers in Meerut refused to use the new rifle and were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment.

Centres of The Revolt

The revolt spread over the entire area from the neighbourhood of Patna to the borders of Rajasthan. The main centres of revolt in these regions namely Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi, Gwalior and Arrah in Bihar.

- **Lucknow:** it was the capital of Awadh. **Begum Hazrat Mahal**, one of the begums of the ex-king of Awadh, took up the leadership of the revolt.
- **Kanpur:** the revolt was led by **Nana Saheb**, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II.
 - He joined the revolt primarily because he was deprived of his pension by the British.
 - The victory was short-lived. Kanpur was recaptured by the British after fresh reinforcements arrived.
 - The revolt was suppressed with terrible vengeance.
 - Nana Saheb escaped but his brilliant commander **Tantia Tope** continued the struggle.
 - Tantia Tope was finally defeated, arrested and hanged.
- **Jhansi:** the twenty-two-year-old **Rani Lakshmi Bai** led the rebels when the British refused to accept the claim of her adopted son to the throne of Jhansi. She fought gallantly against the British forces but was ultimately defeated by the English.
- **Gwalior:** After Rani Lakshmi Bai escaped, she was joined by Tantia Tope and together they marched to Gwalior and captured it.
 - Fierce fighting followed where the Rani of Jhansi fought like a tigress but died, fighting to the very end.
 - Gwalior was recaptured by the British.
- Bihar: the revolt was led by **Kunwar Singh** who belonged to a royal house of Jagdispur, Bihar.

Suppression and The Revolt

- The Revolt of 1857 lasted for more than a year. It was suppressed by the middle of 1858.
- On July 8, 1858, fourteen months after the outbreak at Meerut, peace was finally proclaimed by Lord Canning.

Places of Revolt	Indian Leaders	British Officials who suppressed the revolt
Delhi	Bahadur Shah II	John Nicholson
Lucknow	Begum Hazrat Mahal	Henry Lawrence
Kanpur	Nana Saheb	Sir Colin Campbell

Jhansi & Gwalior	Lakshmi Bai & Tantia Tope	General Hugh Rose
Bareilly	Khan Bahadur Khan	Sir Colin Campbell
Allahabad and Banaras	Maulvi Liyakat Ali	Colonel Ocell
Bihar	Kunwar Singh	William Taylor

Why did the Revolt Fail?

- **Limited uprising:** although the revolt was fairly widespread, a large part of the country remained unaffected by it.
 - The revolt was mainly confined to the Doab region. Sind, Rajputana, Kashmir, most parts of Punjab.
 - The large princely states, **Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore, and Kashmir**, as well as the smaller ones of **Rajputana**, did not join the rebellion
 - The southern provinces did not take part in it.
- **No effective leadership:** the rebels lacked an effective leader. Although Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope and Rani Lakshmi Bai were brave leaders, they could not offer effective leadership to the movement as a whole.
- **Limited resources:** the rebels lacked resources in terms of men and money. The English, on the other hand, received a steady supply of men, money and arms in India.
- **No participation of the middle class:** The English educated middle class, the rich merchants, traders and zamindars of Bengal helped the British to suppress the revolt.

Results of The Revolt

- **End of company rule:** the great uprising of 1857 was an important landmark in the history of modern India.

The revolt marked the end of the East India Company's rule in India.
- **Direct rule of the British Crown:** India now came under the direct rule of the British Crown.
 - This was announced by Lord Canning at a **Durbar in Allahabad** in a proclamation issued on 1 November 1858 in the name of the Queen.
 - The Indian administration was taken over by Queen Victoria, which, in effect, meant the British Parliament.
 - The India office was created to handle the governance and the administration of the country.

- **Religious tolerance:** it was promised and due attention was paid to the customs and traditions of India.
- **Administrative change:** the Governor General's office was replaced by that of the Viceroy.
 - The rights of Indian rulers were recognised.
 - The Doctrine of Lapse was abolished.
 - The right to adopt sons as legal heirs was accepted.
- **Military reorganisation:** the ratio of British officers to Indian soldiers increased but the armoury remained in the hands of the English. It was arranged to end the dominance of the Bengal army.

Conclusion

The revolt of 1857 was an unprecedented event in the history of British rule in India. It united, though in a limited way, many sections of Indian society for a common cause. Though the revolt failed to achieve the desired goal, it sowed the seeds of Indian nationalism.

Books written on the Revolt of 1857

- **The Indian War of Independence** by **Vinayak Damodar Savarkar**
- **Rebellion, 1857: A Symposium** by **Puran Chand Joshi**
- **The Indian Mutiny of 1857** by **George Bruce Malleon**
- **Great Mutiny** by **Christopher Hibbert**
- **Religion and Ideology of the Rebels of 1857** by **Iqbal Hussain**
- **Excavation of Truth: Unsung Heroes of 1857 War of Independence** by **Khan Mohammad Sadiq Khan**