



## **Government of Tamilnadu**

### **Department of Employment and Training**

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# 1857 REVOLT

## Introduction

1857 has been a subject of much debate among historians, both British and Indian. British imperialist historians dismissed it a mutiny, an outbreak among soldiers. Indian historians who explored the role of the people in converting a military outbreak into a rebellion raised two questions to which the imperial historians have had no answer.

If it was only a military outbreak how to explain the revolt of the people even before the sepoys at those stations mutinied?

Why was it necessary to punish the people with fine and hanging for complicity in acts of rebellion?

Col. Malleon, the Adjutant General of the Bengal army in a pamphlet titled *The Making of the Bengal Army* remarked, 'a military mutiny...speedily changed its character and became a national insurrection'.

The historian Keene attributed the outbreak due to operation of variety of factors: to the grievances of princes, soldiers and the people, produced largely by the annexation and reforming zeal of Dalhousie. The greased cartridge affair merely ignited the combustible matter which had already accumulated.

Edward John Thompson described the event 'as largely a real war of independence'. V.D. Savarkar, in his *The War of Indian Independence*, published in 1909, argued that what the British had till then described as merely mutiny was, in fact, a war of independence, much like the American War of Independence.

Despite the fact that the English-educated middle class played no role in the rebellion, nationalist historians championed this argument as the First War of Indian Independence.



## **Causes of the Rebellion:**

### **Territorial Aggrandisement**

- The annexation of Oudh and Jhansi by Dalhousie employing the Doctrine of Lapse and the humiliating treatment meted out to Nana Sahib, the last Peshwa's adopted son produced much dissatisfaction. In the wake of the Inam Commission (1852) appointed by Bombay government to enquire into the cases of "land held rent-free without authority," more than 21,000 estates were confiscated.
- The land settlement in the annexed territories, particularly in Oudh, adversely affected the interests of the talukdars, who turned against the British. Moreover, in Oudh, thousands of inhabitants who depended on the royal patronage and traders who were dealing in rich dresses and highly ornamented footwear and expensive jewellery lost their livelihood.
- Thus Dalhousie through his expansionist policy created hardship to a number of people.

### **Oppressive Land Revenue System:**

- The rate of land revenue was heavy when compared with former settlements. Prior to the British, Indian rulers collected revenue only when land was cultivated. The British treated land revenue as a rent and not a tax. This meant that revenue was extracted whether the land was cultivated or not, and at the same rate.
- The prices of agricultural commodities continued to crash throughout the first half of nineteenth century and in the absence of any remission or relief from the colonial state, small and marginal farmers as well as cultivating tenants were subject to untold misery.

### **Alienation of Muslim Aristocracy and Intelligentsia**

- Muslims depended largely on public service. Before the Company's rule, they had filled the most honourable posts in former governments. As commandants of cavalry some of them received high incomes. But under the Company's administration, they suffered.
- English language and western education pushed the Muslim intelligentsia into insignificance. The abolition of Persian language in the law courts and admission

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into public service by examination decreased the Muslim's chances of official employment.

### **Religious Sentiments**

- The Act of 1856 providing for enrolment of high caste men as sepoys in the Bengal army stipulated that future recruits give up martial careers or their caste scruples. This apart, acts such as the abolition of sati, legalization of remarriage of Hindu widows, prohibition of infanticide were viewed as interference in religious beliefs.
- In 1850, to the repugnance of orthodox Hindus, the Lex Loci Act was passed permitting converts to Christianity to retain their patrimony (right to inherit property from parents or ancestors). Further the religious sentiments of the sepoys – Hindus and Muslims – were outraged when information spread that the fat of cows and pigs was used in the greased cartridges.
- The Indian sepoys were to bite them before loading the new Enfield rifle. This was viewed as a measure to convert people to Christianity. In every sense, therefore, 1857 was a climatic year. The cartridge affair turned out to be a trigger factor for the rebellion.
- The dispossessed, discontented rajas, ranis, zamindars and tenants, artisans and workers, the Muslim intelligentsia, priests, and the Hindu pandits saw the eruption as an opportunity to redress their grievances.

### **Course of the Revolt**

- The rebellion first began as a mutiny in Barrackpore (near Calcutta). Mangal Pandey murdered his officer in January 1857 and a mutiny broke out there. In the following month, at Meerut, of the 90 sepoys who were to receive their cartridges only five obeyed orders.
- On 10<sup>th</sup> May three sepoy regiments revolted, killed their officers, and released those who had been imprisoned. The next day they reached Delhi, murdered Europeans, and seized that city. The rebels proclaimed Bahadur Shah II as emperor.
- By June the revolt had spread to Rohilkhand, where the whole countryside was in rebellion. Khan Bahadur Khan proclaimed himself the viceroy of the Emperor of India. Nearly all of Bundelkhand and the entire Doab region were up in arms

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- against the British. At Jhansi, Europeans were massacred and Laxmi Bai, aged 22, was enthroned.
- In Kanpur Nana Sahib led the rebels. About 125 English women and their children along with English officers were killed and their bodies were thrown into a well. Termed as the Kanpur massacre, this incident angered the British and General Henry Havelock, who was sent to deal with the situation, defeated Nana Sahib the day after the massacre. Neill, who was left there, took terrible vengeance and those whom he regarded as guilty were executed. Towards the close of November Tantia Tope seized Kanpur but it was soon recovered by Campbell. The Lucknow residency, defended by Henry Lawrence fell into the hands of rebels.
  - Havelock marched towards Lucknow after defeating Nana Sahib, but he had to retire. By the close of July John Nicholson sent by John Lawrence to capture Delhi succeeded in capturing Delhi. The Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah II now became a prisoner and his two sons and grandson were shot dead after their surrender.
  - Resistance in Oudh was prolonged because of the involvement of talukdars as well as peasants in the revolt. Many of these taluqdars were loyal to the Nawab of Awadh, and they joined Begum Hazrat Mahal (the wife of the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah) in Lucknow to fight the British.
  - Since a vast majority of the sepoys were from peasant families in the villages of Oudh, the grievances of the peasants had affected them. Oudh was the nursery of the Bengal Army for a long time. The sepoys from Oudh complained of low levels of pay and the difficulty of getting leave.
  - They all rallied behind Begum Hazrat Mahal. Led by Raja Jailal Singh, they fought against the British forces and seized control of Lucknow and she declared her son, Birjis Qadra, as the ruler (Wali) of Oudh. Neill who wreaked terrible vengeance in Kanpur was shot dead in the street fighting at Lucknow. Lucknow could be finally captured only in March 1858.
  - Hugh Rose besieged Jhansi and defeated Tantia Tope early in April. Yet Lakshmi Bai audaciously captured Gwalior forcing pro-British Scindia to flee. Rose with his army directly confronted Lakshmi Bai.
  - In this battle Lakshmi Bai died fighting admirably. Rose described Lakshmi Bai as the best and bravest military leader of the rebels. Gwalior was recaptured soon. In

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July 1858 Canning announced the suppression of the “Mutiny” and restoration of peace. Tantia Tope was captured and executed in April 1859. Bahadur Shah II, captured in September 1857, was tried and declared guilty. He was exiled to Rangoon (Myanmar), where he died in November 1862 at the age of 87. With his death the Mughal dynasty came to an end.

## **Effects of the Great Rebellion**

### **Queen’s Proclamation 1858**

- A Royal Durbar was held at Allahabad on November 1, 1858. The proclamation issued by Queen Victoria was read at the Durbar by Lord Canning, who was the last Governor General and the first Viceroy of India.
- Hereafter India would be governed by and in the name of the British Monarch through a Secretary of State. The Secretary of State was to be assisted by a Council of India consisting of fifteen members. As a result, the Court of Directors and the Board of Control of the East India Company were abolished and the Crown and Parliament became constitutionally responsible for the governance of India. The separate army of the East India Company was abolished and merged with that of Crown.
- Proclamation endorsed the treaties made by the Company with Indian princes, promised to respect their rights, dignity and honour, and disavowed any ambition to extend the existing British possessions in India.
- The new council of 1861 was to have Indian nomination, since the Parliament thought the Legislative Council of 1853 consisted of only Europeans who had never bothered to consult Indian opinion and that led to the crisis.
- The Doctrine of Lapse and the policy of annexation to be given up. A general amnesty (pardon) to be granted to the rebels except those who directly involved in killing the British subjects.
- The educational and public works programmes (roads, railways, telegraphs, and irrigation) were stimulated by the realization of their value for the movement of troops in times of emergency.



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- Hopes of a revival of the past diminished and the traditional structure of Indian society began to break down. A Westernized English-educated middle class soon emerged with a heightened sense of nationalism.

**Questions:**

1. Discuss about the Causes of the Rebellion.
2. Explain in detail about the Course of the 1857 Revolt.
3. What are the effects of the Great Rebellion?

