

The First War of Independence, 1857

Causes of the Revolt of 1857

The revolt of 1857 shook the foundations of the British rule in India. The revolt took place because of numerous reasons. Some reasons for the revolt were

Political Causes

- **Policy of Expansion:** After the Battle of Plassey, the British began to conquer Indian territories rapidly. They conquered Indian territories by fighting wars, by implementing the Doctrine of Lapse, by forcing kingdoms to sign the Subsidiary Alliance System and on the pretext of alleged mismanagement of the states by Indian kings. By 1856, almost all kingdoms came under the British rule directly or indirectly and the Indian princes became puppet rulers. This created resentment among the kings and their subjects.
- **Doctrine of Lapse:** According to the Doctrine of Lapse introduced by Lord Dalhousie, if any Indian ruler died without leaving a male heir, his kingdom passed over to the British. Because of the Doctrine of Lapse, many states such as Jhansi, Satara and Nagpur were annexed by the Company. The rulers of these kingdoms like Rani Laxmibai thus rose in revolt against the Company.
- **Annexation of Awadh:** Lord Dalhousie annexed Awadh on the pretext of alleged mismanagement. This was an arbitrary decision as the British seemed to have broken their promises made to the British chiefs. This caused anguish among Indians—rulers and people.
- **Disrespect Shown towards Bahadur Shah Zafar:** Bahadur Shah, the Mughal ruler, was a pensioner of the British. Lord Dalhousie announced that he and his family will not be able to reside in Red Fort. The name of the Mughal king was removed from the coins which were minted by the Company. Lord Canning declared Bahadur Shah Zafar as the last king of the Mughal dynasty. He announced that none of his descendants would be recognised as kings; rather, they would only be called princes.
- **Treatment Given to Nana Saheb and Rani Laxmibai:** Nan Sahib, the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa, was refused pension by the British. This created indignation in the Maratha community. Rani Laxmibai also became the fierce enemy of the British after her kingdom of Jhansi was annexed by the British on the principle of the Doctrine of Lapse.



The announcement of Lord Canning that the sons of Bahadur Shah Zafar will not be recognised as the kings filled the hearts of many Indians with anger against the British rule.

Socio-Religious Causes

- **Interference with Social Customs:** The English took various measures to reform the evils which had crept into Indian society. The practice of sati was banned in 1829 and the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. The Indians disapproved the British interference in their social system.
- **Policy of Racial Discrimination:** The British racially discriminated against the Indians. The British believed that they are superior to the Indians and followed a policy of contempt towards the Indians. Indians were ill-treated and insulted.
- **Laws of Property:** In 1850, a new law was passed according to which an Indian who had converted to Christianity could inherit the property of his ancestors. Indians regarded this as a trick by the British to convert people into Christianity.

- **Activities of the Missionaries:** The activities of the missionaries increased in the early nineteenth century. The Indians believed that the government was supporting missionary activities and wanted to convert them to Christianity.
- **Taxing Religious Institutions:** The British began to tax lands belonging to temples and mosques. The families dependent on these lands began to propagate that the British were trying to undermine religions in India.

Economic Causes

Exploitation of Economic Resources: The British overexploited the resources of the country. India was forced to export raw materials to Britain at exorbitantly low rates. Plantation products and food grains were exported to Britain. While no import duties were imposed on ready-made British goods, high import duties were levied on the Indian goods exported to Britain. This resulted in the decline in handicraft and many subsidiary industries in India.

Drain of Wealth: The British, after establishing their rule in Bengal, began to purchase raw materials from India meant to be exported to England out of Indian revenues. The salaries and pension of British officers were also paid from Indian revenues. This marked the beginning of the drain of Indian wealth to Britain.

Decay of Cottage and Handicraft Industries: The Indian handicraft industry began to decline because of the free trade policy of the English. The Indian goods were not able to compete with the cheap English machine-made goods. Further, high trade duties were imported on the Indian goods entering Britain. This resulted in the loss of livelihood of millions of artisans and weavers.

Exploitation of the Indian Peasantry: The British levied high taxes on the Indian peasantry. For example, the land revenues in Bengal were raised considerably by the British. Many peasants had to sell their lands as they were not able to pay the increased land revenues. The traders and moneylenders who became the owners of the land did nothing to improve to quality of the land as they were only concerned with the collection of land revenues. As a result, the condition of the Indian peasantry deteriorated.

Poverty and Famine: The economic policies of the British impoverished the general Indian people. Famines became recurrent in India, and nothing was done by the British to minimise the impact of famines.

Decline of Landed Aristocracy: The landed aristocracy such as the taluqdars and hereditary landlords were deprived of their estates. According to the provisions of the Inam Commission passed in 1852, about 20,000 estates were confiscated and were given to the highest bidder. In Awadh, landed aristocracy was deprived of its rights over land.



Mangal Pandey was hanged because he refused to use the greased cartridges.

Military Causes

Ill-treatment of Indian Soldiers: The British government ill treated the Indian soldiers. They were denied better pay and facilities. They were also often humiliated by the English officers. No Indian soldier could rise above the post of 'subedar' in the Indian army. The British had no regard for Indian sentiments.

General Service Enlistment Act: The Company passed a new law in 1856, according to which a sepoy had to travel overseas whenever required by the Company. It was believed by the Hindus that one could lose his caste status and religion if he crosses the seas. The sepoys thought the Company was trying to defame their religion.

Larger Proportion of Indians in the British Army: The British army consisted of more Indian soldiers. It made it easier for the Indian soldiers to take up arms against the British.

Deprivation of Allowances: The Post Office Act of 1854 withdrew the privilege of free postage enjoyed by the sepoys. The sepoys were also required to serve in areas located away from their homes without extra payment and additional Bhatta (foreign service allowance). This enraged the Indian soldiers.

Low Salaries: The wages and salaries of the Indian soldiers were too low to support their families. The British soldiers received higher salaries.

Immediate Cause

The British had introduced a new 'Enfield Rifle' in the army. This rifle needed a cartridge which had a greased paper cover. This paper cover had to be bitten off before loading the cartridge into the rifle. Rumours spread that the greased paper was made of beef and pork. The soldiers felt that it was a move by the British to defame their religion. Mangal Pandey urged his fellow soldiers not to use the rifle. On 29 March 1857, he attacked his officers in Barrackpore. He was later hanged.

On 9 May 1857, eighty-five Indian soldiers who had refused to use the greased cartridge were dismissed from their services and were jailed for disobeying their officers. This marked the beginning of the sepoy revolt in Meerut which later spread to the other parts of northern India.

Main Events of the Revolt

The main centres of the revolt were

Delhi

- The sepoys of Meerut were joined by the local soldiers of Delhi. They killed many British officers and declared Bahadur Shah Zafar as the leader of the revolt.
- Later General Bakht Khan commanded the Bareilly troops into Delhi and provided leadership to the rebels.
- After the recapture of Delhi by troops laid by Sir John Nicholson, Bahadur Shah Zafar was found guilty of aiding the rebellion. His sons and grandson were killed and he was exiled to Yangon in Myanmar.

Awadh

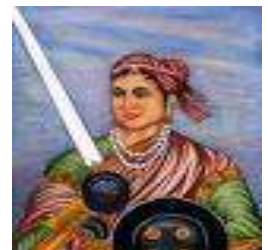
- On 30 May 1857, a great rising took place in Awadh. Within the next few days, the whole of Awadh was captured by the rebels.
- The leader of the revolt in Awadh was Begum Hazrat Mahal. After the city was recaptured by the British, Begum Hazrat mahal fled to Nepal.

Kanpur

- The revolt in Kanpur was led by Nana Sahib. A large number of Englishmen, women and children were captured and killed by the infuriated mob.
- Nana Sahib was defeated by the British in December 1857. He fled to Nepal where he died.

Jhansi

- In Jhansi, the revolt was led by Rani Laxmibai, whose state was annexed by Lord Dalhousie on the basis of the Doctrine of Lapse. She rose against the British and joined the revolt.
- By June 1857, the English had lost control over many parts of Jhansi. When the English forces under Hugh Rose laid a siege to the fort of Jhansi, Laxmibai valiantly fought against the English troops. When it became impossible for her to hold the fort any longer, she escaped to Kalpi with lightning speed.
- At Kalpi she was joined by another remarkable Indian leader Tantya Tope, the commander of the forces of Nana Sahib. Both marched to Gwalior.
- Rani Laxmibai fell to the large number of British troops and was killed while fighting. Tantya Tope managed to escape, but he was later captured and killed by the British troops.



Rani Laxmibai was one of the leading figures of the Indian rebellion that broke out in 1857.

Some other centres of the revolt were Bareilly and Arrah (Bihar). In Bareilly, the revolt was led by **Khan Bahadur Khan**, and in Bihar, the revolt was led by **Kunwar Singh**, an old zamindar. Maulvi Ahmadullah led the revolt in Faizabad.

Consequences of the Revolt

The revolt of 1857 was brutally suppressed by the British. The revolt brought far-reaching effects on India's socio-political life. These were

End of the Company's Rule

- The power to govern India was transferred from the Company to the British crown.
- The Board of Directors and the Board of Control of India were abolished and the office of the Secretary of State for India was created. He was to look after the formulation of the British policies in India. His salary and allowances were to be paid from Indian revenues.
- The Governor General in India now came to be known as the Viceroy of India. Lord Canning became the first viceroy of the country.



After the revolt of 1857, the control of Indian territories was transferred from the Company to the Crown.

Proclamation of Queen Victoria

- The Proclamation of Queen Victoria promised the following:
- To follow a policy of non-intervention in social and religious matters of the Indians
- To treat the European and Indian subjects equally
- To grant pardon to all Indians who had taken part in the revolt except those who were guilty of murdering the British citizens.
- To work for promoting Indian industries

End of Mughals and Peshwaship

After the revolt, the sons and grandson of Bahadur Shah Zafar were shot dead. The Mughal Empire in India came to an end after the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar. After Nana Sahib fled to Nepal after the revolt, the institution of Peshwaship also came to an end. Two of the most formidable enemies of the British were thus destroyed during the revolt.

Relations with the Princely States

The British abandoned the Doctrine of Lapse and the Subsidiary Alliance System. The loyalty of the Indian princes during the revolt was rewarded.

Policy of Divide and Rule

As both Hindus and Muslims had participated in the revolt, the British began to follow the policy of divide and rule. They not only created a rift between the Hindus and the Muslims but also between castes and various groups.

Racial Discrimination

The British subjected Indians to insult and humiliation. Indians were dubbed as unworthy of trust. Railway compartments, parks, hotels and clubs were reserved exclusively for the British.

Changes in the Structure of Army

- The strength of European troops in India was increased.
- European soldiers were posted in key strategic locations.
- Artillery was placed under British control.
- Discriminations on the basis of caste, region and religion were practised in the recruitment of soldiers in the army to prevent another anti-British uprising.
- Newspapers, journals and nationalist publications were prevented from reaching the soldiers to avoid any kind of mutiny.

Rise of Nationalism

The revolt of 1857 and its brutal suppression by the British paved the way for the rise of the Indian National Movement. The heroic struggle of the Indian leaders such as Rani Laxmibai, Nana Sahib and Tantya Tope continued to inspire millions of Indians to fight against the British rule in India.

Limitations of the Revolt of 1857

- The revolt was not widespread in nature. The western, eastern and southern parts of India remained unaffected by the revolt. The English received the help of the soldiers of the Rajputana, Punjab and Sind in crushing the revolt.
- The Indian rebels were not armed with modern weapons. They lacked in organisation and planning. On the contrary, the English soldiers were armed with modern weapons and ammunition.
- Many rulers did not participate in the revolt. The Sindhias of Gwalior, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Holkars of Indore and the rulers of Patiala remained unaffected by the revolt.
- Many zamindars and moneylenders did not support the uprising of 1857.
- Many sections of educated Indians did not support the revolt as they believed that India could be modernised only under British rule.

Nature of the Revolt

- A revolt is an uprising which occurs because of the unjust or unfair policies of the rulers. Many historians have written about the nature of the revolt of 1857.
- According to most British historians like P. E. Roberts, this revolt was purely a military revolt which was mainly fought by the Indian sepoys. However, according to many Indian historians, the revolt was more of a national uprising against the unjust and selfish policies of the British rulers.
- Veer Savarkar termed the revolt of 1857 as the 'First War of Indian Independence'. According to him, the revolt was not limited to only the Indian sepoys, as many peasants, zamindars and rulers participated in the revolt.
- We can say that the revolt was much more than the mutiny of Indian soldiers. It had spread to many parts of north and central India. Although the revolt has also been termed the First War of Indian Independence, it has to be taken into account that it did not affect large parts of western, eastern and southern India. Further, the idea of nationalism or independence till now had not touched Indian hearts and minds. Many soldiers from Punjab had helped the English in crushing the revolt. Therefore, the revolt can be more suitably termed an Indian uprising which was directed against the unjust and unfair policies of the British rule in India.