

## **CC-12: HISTORY OF INDIA (1750s-1857)**

### **VI. POPULAR RESISTANCE:**

#### **(B). UPRISING OF 1857**

The year 1857 witnessed armed revolts in parts of central and northern India, as a result of which effective British rule nearly collapsed in these regions until the spring of 1858, when order was restored again by the advancing imperial forces. The revolt witnessed an extraordinary amount of violence unleashed on both sides. As British rule had "meticulously constructed a monopoly of violence", it was retorted with an equal amount of counter-violence of their subjects. If the British counter-insurgency measures included public execution of the rebels, blowing them off from cannons and indiscriminately burning native villages, the rebels also massacred white civilians-women and children included-without mercy.

The revolt, for long mistaken to be a mere mutiny of the Indian sepoys in the Bengal army, was indeed joined by an aggrieved rural society of north India. Its causes, therefore, need to be searched for not only in the disaffection of the army, but in a long drawn process of fundamental social and economic change that upset the peasant communities during the first century of the Company's rule.

The Company's government while raising a standing army since mid-eighteenth century respected the traditions and customs of the indigenous communities and a high caste identity of the army was deliberately encouraged. This was particularly true of the Bengal army, which had a predominantly high caste character, mainly consisting of Brahmans, Rajputs and Bhumihars, whose caste rules, dietary and travel restrictions were scrupulously respected by the army administration, under instructions from Warren Hastings. However, from the

1820s things began to change, as army reforms were initiated to introduce a more universalised military culture. As the reforms in the 1820s and 1830s sought to establish a tighter control over the army administration and began to curtail some of the caste privileges and pecuniary benefits, there were acts of resistance, which continued into the 1840s. These incidents prepared the backdrop for the mutiny of 1857.

The Uprising of 1857 was a product of the cumulative effect of British expansionist policies, economic exploitation and administrative policies over the year. These policies had adversely affected the positions of the rulers of the Indian states, sepoys, zamindars, peasants, artisans, traders etc. The resentment of the Indians had found expression from time to time in a number of insurgencies and mutinies in different parts of the country. But the Revolt of 1857 ended the rule of the East India Company, as after its pacification in 1858 by an act of parliament the Indian empire was taken over by the British Crown.

#### CAUSES FOR THE UPRISING OF 1857

- The most important cause for the Uprising of 1857 was the discontent of the Sepoys. Discrimination in payment and promotion of the sepoys by the British officials; Refusal of the British to pay foreign service allowance while fighting in remote places like Punjab and Sindh; Religious objection of the high caste Hindu sepoys to Lord Canning's General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 ordering all recruits to be ready for service both within and outside India.
- Disparity in numbers between European and Indian troops and the faulty distribution of troops was also a cause for the Revolt of 1857.
- Destruction of self-sufficient village economy-industries and handicraft due to the one-way free trade policy of the British.

- Grievances of the peasants against the British government resulting from the loss of their lands to the money-lenders and zamindars because of the new land revenue settlements introduced by the British.
- Loss of traditional zamindari to the new class of urban based absentee landlord turned a section of zamindar class of people against the British government.
- Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse and annexation of territories of the native rulers created a sense of grievance among the native rulers. Satara was annexed to the British empire in 1858, Jaitpur and Sambalpur were annexed in 1849, Baghat in 1850, Udaipur in 1852 and so on. Lord Dalhousie annexed Awadh on grounds of misrule in 1856.
- Fear of the Indians (both Hindu and Muslim) due to the activities of the Christian missionaries and the protection and encouragement given to them by the British government.
- IMMEDIATE CAUSE: - Introduction of the new Enfield Rifle with greased cartridge (supposedly with fat of cows and pigs), whose end had to be bitten off before loading it into the rifle caused disaffection among the sepoys and led to disobeying of orders by the sepoys of the 19<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry stationed at Berhampur on February 26, 1857, and its disbandment by the British Government.

A young sepoy of the 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry, Mangal Pande, went a step forward and fired at the Sergeant Major of his regiment. He was overpowered and executed and his regiment, too, was disbanded. The 7<sup>th</sup> Oudh Regiment which defied its officers met with a similar fate.

Within a month of the capture of Delhi, the revolt spread to different parts of the country: Kanpur, Lucknow, Benares, Allahabad, Bareilly, Jagdishpur and Jhansi. The rebel activity was marked by intense anti-British feelings and the administration was invariably toppled. In the absence of any leaders

from their own ranks, the insurgents turned to the traditional leaders of the Indian society- the territorial aristocrats and feudal chiefs who has suffered at the hands of the British.

At Kanpur the natural choice was Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the last Peshwa Baji Rao II. At Bareilly, Khan Bahadur, a descendant of the former ruler of Rohilkhand, was placed in command. In Bihar the revolt was led by Kunwar Singh, the zamindar of Jagdishpur, a 70-year-old man on the brink of bankruptcy. The most outstanding leader of the revolt was Rani Lakshmibai who assumed the leadership of the sepoys at Jhansi.

The Revolt began at Meerut on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1857 and then gathering force rapidly it cut across northern India. It soon embraced a vast area from Punjab in the north and the Narmada in the south to Bihar in the east and the Rajputana in the west. The local infantry in Delhi also joined the Uprising. The entire Bengal army soon rose in revolt which spread quickly. Awadh, Rohilkhand, the Doab, the Bundelkhand, central India, large parts of Bihar and the East Punjab all shook off British authority. Everywhere in northern and central India the mutiny of the sepoys triggered popular revolts of the civilian population. After the sepoys had destroyed the British authority, the common people rose up in arms often fighting with spears and axes, bow, arrows, lathis, sickles and crude muskets.

### CAUSES FOR THE FAILURE OF THE UPRISING OF 1857

The Uprising of 1857, though an outbreak of formidable nature, failed owing to the defective equipment and organisation of the insurgents. There are certain causes responsible for the failure of the Revolt of 1857.

- The Revolt of 1857 was localised as many parts of India remained unaffected by it at all. Territory south of river Narmada, Sindh, Central and Eastern Bengal – all these places amongst many other

places remained undisturbed. The Gurkhas of Nepal joined side with the British army during the Uprising.

- There was no centralized leader to led the Uprising as a whole. The leaders were very capable but they could render leadership only in their areas of control. The rebels failed on account of lack of leadership among them.
- The rebels worked without any plan and moreover what contributed to their failure even more was the lack of modern weapons. They were short of modern weapons and other materials for war and fought with ancient weapons like spikes and arrows.
- The rebels of the Revolt of 1857 had no forward-looking programme to implement after the capture of power.
- The rebels lacked support from the Educated Indian and slowly the merchants, money-lenders and zamindar became unfriendly to the Uprising.
- The rebels of the Uprising of 1857 had to face as their opposition the British army which had the ablest Generals and officials who were successful in suppressing the revolt with the help of their immense resources, superior military weapons and techniques and their able leadership.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UPRISING OF 1857

The foremost result of the events of the Revolt of 1857 was the abolition of the East India Company and the transfer of the Indian administration to the British crown, which was announced by the Queen's proclamation of November 1, 1858. It ended an era of annexation and expansion. The Act of 1858 ended the dualism in the control of the Indian affairs and made the crown directly responsible for the management of the Indian affairs. The Indian army was thoroughly reorganised. Indian were associated with legislative matters and

administration with the Indian Councils Acts of 1861. Apart from all these the Revolt or Uprising of 1857 left a legacy of racial bitterness.

### NATURE OF THE UPRISING OF 1857

Divergent opinion and views had expressed regarding the nature of the Uprising of 1857. British historians insisted that the Uprising of 1857 was nothing more than a sepoy mutiny. The civil unrest which accompanied the mutiny was ignored altogether. V.D. Savarkar called it the 'First War of Indian Independence.'

It was definitely something more than a sepoy mutiny but something less than a national revolt because the upsurge of the people were limited to northern India. The sepoys were undoubtedly the mainstay of the rebellion. But millions of ordinary citizens also participated in the rebellions.

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