

# The Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 which is called ‘Sepoy Mutiny’, ‘Great Revolt’ and the ‘**First War of Indian Independence**’ is the watershed in the history of pre-independent and early colonial India.

It is so, as the one hundred years penetration of the British East India into different parts of India through wars and diplomacy and the introduction of alien revenue, judicial social intervention methods and language of English as the medium of instruction at the school and collegiate level destabilized the existing pre-British socio-cultural fabric.

Added to this destabilization, the ruination of the Indian industries, handicrafts and agriculture led to rural indebtedness and the growth of daily wage earners and de-industrialization, and the rise of a capitalist class of moneylenders, rich landlords and Zamindars as collaborators of the British rule and hegemony created strong resentment against the British.

Further the latest device of the Doctrine of Lapse implemented by Dalhousie dispossessed a group of native rulers and leaders and they joined hands with the rest of the population. Thus, by 1857 the situation was very stormy and ready for inflammation by any factor and the greased cartridge affair acted as the last straw on the camel’s back.

No single segment of population welcomed the rule of the British by 1857. The peasant and tribal revolts of which we have studied in the previous pages also clearly reveal how the British had to face the opposition of the peasants and the tribal.

In the end, we may presume that the revolt of 1857 was the result of a culmination of popular dissatisfaction that had been simmering for a long time against the policies of the British in India – expansion, exploitation and economic drain and humiliation of the Indian spirit by advocating the white- man’s civilizing mission – factors of multiple dimension of direct and indirect, long run and short run and of immediate nature led to the revolt of 1857.

**These multiple factors are:**

(1) Political and administrative,

(2) Economic,

(3) Social and religious, and

(4) Military and the immediate affair of greased cartridges.

### **1. Political and Administrative Reasons:**

The expansionist and annexationist policies of the British power in India made all the Indian rulers, big and small, Hindu and Muslim look with suspicion and develop hatred towards the British power in India. Naturally, this type of reaction is justified as the Indians are the losers and the British gainers. Tara Chand observes, "Each region became, after annexation, a scene of resistance and revolt, in which land holders and peasants were involved and in which the disbanded soldiers of the landlords, the ministers of religion and the dismissed dependents participated", as a result of the British occupation by annexation.

The native rulers were forced to disband their army who failed to obtain gainful employment elsewhere. Further, the open disrespect exhibited by the British towards the last of the Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah Zafar made the Muslims rise in revolt. The unjustified and unethical Doctrine of Lapse was the last straw on the camel's back which made the native rulers take up arms and start revolt. There is a view that resentment was brewing since 1832 which took a shape in 1857. It is difficult to accept the conspiracy theory of the native rulers against the British.

The Indians in general did not accept the administrative changes initiated and implemented, as most of them were alien in nature and replaced the age-old existing rules and regulations. Creation of a new administrative cadre, replacement of Persian by English and the colonial rule which created hardships to all sections of people and lack of personal touch between the ruler and the ruled led to a sort of distrust in the administrative set-up. This distrust hardened in due course as Indians were denied positions in all high civil and military jobs which were reserved for the Europeans and in particular to the British.

Failure on the part of the British East India Company in honouring the provision of 1833 Charter Act that "no Indian shall by reason of his faith, place of birth, descent, complexion or any of them, be disabled from holding any place, office or employment under the East India Company", convinced the educated Indians of the arrogant racial hatred of the British towards the natives of India.

### **2. Economic Causes:**

Added to political and administrative distrust for the British East India Company, the economic policies of the British resulted in impoverishing all the segments of the Indian society except a handful of collaborators among the Indians. Owing to their colonial policies of economic

exploitation, industry, trade commerce and agriculture languished and India became de-industrialized, impoverished and debt-ridden, while, William Bentinck himself admitted that by 1833-34 “The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India”.

The parliamentary reports of 1840 also record that while the British cotton and silk goods imported into India paid a duty of 10 per cent and woolen goods 2 per cent, Indian cotton goods exported to Britain paid 10 per cent, silk goods 20 per cent and the woolen goods 30 per cent. Further, the abolition of the monopoly of trade in 1813 of East India Company and the introduction of free trade by 1833 increased further the exploitation of the economy of India.

The levels of exploitation of Indians were so high, that even the British felt so sad and disturbed that they wrote, “India is as much a manufacturing country as she is an agricultural one. She is a manufacturing country; her manufacturers of various descriptions have existed for ages, and have never been able to be completed by any nation wherever fair play has been given to them.

To reduce her now to an agricultural country would be an injustice to India.” While the above was the opinion of a Britisher, Mr. Martin, another Britisher, Mr Cope made the following statement before the Parliamentary Committee in 1840: “I certainly pity the East Indian labourer, but at the same time I have a great feeling for my family than for the East Indian labourer’s family. I think it is wrong to sacrifice the comforts of my family for the sake of the East Indian labourer because his condition happens to be worse than mine”.

As a result of the British economic exploitation all classes of people, peasants, landlords, traders, industrialists, labourers and middle class of India were badly affected and it is no exaggeration to state that unlimited poverty enveloped the entire society and made India an underdeveloped country.

### **3. Social and Religious Causes:**

Added to the political and administrative distrust and hatred, the economic exploitation, the social and religious discrimination of superiority complex viewing the Indians as racially inferior and culturally backward and their belief that God had created the white men to civilize the Indians and intolerance of the idolatry of the Hindus by the Christian missionaries also created distrust between the natives and the British.

The British were so arrogant and haughty, that a police regulation published by a magistrate at Agra categorically states “Every native, whatever his pretended rank may be, ought to be

compelled, under heavy penalties, to salaam all English gentlemen in the streets and if the native is on horseback or in a carriage, to dismount and stand in a respectful attitude until the European has passed him.”

Further, the missionary activities of charitable and philanthropic nature were looked with suspicion as the missionaries used to heckle the Hindus for worshipping many gods and goddesses, and their efforts to convert to Christianity many economically and socially backward community people and in their educational institutions they began to openly canvas about Christianity.

All these made the Indians come to the conclusion that their religion was in danger and this suspicion aroused the religious and social sentiment of the Hindus against the British. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan admits that during the famines of 1837, many orphans became Christians.

Further, the contents of the letter of Mr. Edmund, a missionary also strengthened the apprehensions of the Hindus. The letter reads as follows: “As all India obeyed one government as in all parts of the country kept up constant communication with the other by means of the electric telegraph – and as the Railway system united the extremes of the Peninsula, it was necessary that there should be one religion also, and therefore that everyone should embrace Christianity”.

Rev. Kennedy also observed, “Whatever misfortune may come on us, so long as our empire in India continues, so long let us not forget that our chief work of the propagation of Christianity in the land until Hindustan from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, embraces the religion of Christ and until it condemns the Hindu and Muslim religions, our effort must continue persistently. For this work, we must make all efforts we can and use all power and all the authority in our hands”.

The intervention of the British in social traditions by prohibiting the practice of Sati in 1829, passing laws relating to succession of property in 1832 and 1856, Widow Remarriage Act in 1856 and the Religious Disabilities Act of 1856 further strengthened the view of the conservatives that the Hindu religion and customs were being tampered by the British with the specific objective of Christianizing India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan observes: “All persons, whether intelligent or ignorant, respectable or otherwise, believed that the government was really and sincerely desirous of interfering with the religion and customs of the people, converting them all, whether Hindus or Muhammadans to Christianity and forcing them to adopt the European manners and habits”.

In a way, partially the outburst of 1857 was a revolt of the old against the new, of Indian conservatism against the arrogant British hegemony and Christian indoctrination. The conservation of religion took the shape of rallying point in the revolt which was seen as a war of religion by the sepoys and the masses to some extent but religious grievances were not the total rallying points of the great revolt.

**4. Military Grievances:** The extension of British dominion in India had adversely affected the service condition of the Sepoys. They were required to serve in an area away from their homes without the payment of extra Bhatta. An important cause of Military discontent was the General Service Enlistment Act, 1856, which made it compulsory for the sepoys to cross the seas, whenever required. The Post Office Act of 1854 withdrew the free postage facility for them.

#### **Leaders Associated with the Revolt of 1857**

<b>Barrackpore</b>	Mangal Pandey
<b>Delhi</b>	Bahadur Shah II, General Bakht Khan
<b>Delhi</b>	Hakim Ahsanullah (Chief advisor to Bahadur Shah II)
<b>Lucknow</b>	Begum Hazrat Mahal, Birjis Qadir, Ahmadullah (advisor of the ex-Nawab of Awadh)
<b>Kanpur</b>	Nana Sahib, Rao Sahib (nephew of Nana), Tantia Tope, Azimullah Khan (advisor of Nana Sahib)
<b>Jhansi</b>	Rani Laxmibai
<b>Bihar (Jagdishpur)</b>	Kunwar Singh, Amar Singh
<b>Allahabad and Banaras</b>	Maulvi Liyakat Ali
<b>Faizabad</b>	Maulvi Ahmadullah (He declared the Revolt as Jihad against English)
<b>Farrukhabad</b>	Tufzal Hasan Khan
<b>Bijnaur</b>	Mohammad Khan
<b>Muradabad</b>	Abdul Ali Khan
<b>Bareilly</b>	Khan Bahadur Khan
<b>Mandsor</b>	Firoz Shah
<b>Gwalior/Kanpur</b>	Tantia Tope

<b>Assam</b>	Kandapareshwar Singh, Manirama Datta
<b>Orissa</b>	Surendra Shahi, Ujjwal Shahi
<b>Kullu</b>	Raja Pratap Singh
<b>Rajasthan</b>	Jaidayal Singh and Hardayal Singh
<b>Gorakhpur</b>	Gajadhar Singh
<b>Mathura</b>	Sevi Singh, Kadam Singh

### **British Officials Associated with Revolt**

<b>General John Nicholson</b>	Captured Delhi on 20th September 1857 (Nicholson died soon due to a mortal wound received during the fighting).
<b>Major Hudson</b>	Killed Bahadur Shah's sons and grandsons in Delhi.
<b>Sir Hugh Wheeler</b>	Defense against Nana Sahib's forces till 26th June 1857. British forces surrendered on 27th on the promised of safe conduct to Allahabad.
<b>General Neil</b>	Recaptured Banaras and Allahabad in June 1857. At Kanpur, he killed Indians as revenge against the killing of English by Nana Sahib's forces. Died at Lucknow while fighting against the rebels.
<b>Sir Colin Campbell</b>	Final recovery of Kanpur on 6th December, 1857. Final reoccupation of Lucknow on 21 st March, 1858. Recapture of Bareilly on 5th May, 1858.
<b>Henry Lawrence</b>	Chief Commissioner of Awadh. Who died during the seizure of British residency by rebels at Lucknow on 2nd July, 1857!
<b>Major General Havelock</b>	Defeated the rebels (Nana Sahib's force) on 17th July, 1857. Died at Lucknow in December 1857.
<b>William Taylor and Eye</b>	Suppressed the revolt at Arrah in August 1857.
<b>Hugh Rose</b>	Suppressed the revolt at Jhansi and recaptured Gwalior on 20th June, 1858. The whole of Central India and Bundelkhand was brought under British control by him.
<b>Colonel Ocell</b>	Captured Banaras.

## **Causes of Failure of the revolt of 1857**

The revolt was eventually not successful in ousting the British from the country because of several factors.

1. The sepoys lacked one clear leader; there were several. They also did not have a coherent plan by which the foreigners would be routed.
2. Indian rulers who aided the revolt did not envision any plan for the country after the British were defeated.
3. Majorly northern India was affected by this revolt. The three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras remained mostly unaffected.