

***Self-Learning Material for B.A Course:***

**TOPIC: THE REVOLT OF 1857**

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# **UNIT: 5 THE REVOLT OF 1857**

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## **5.0. Objectives**

In this unit, we will discuss the background, the intensity and the failure of the revolt of 1857. It will provide an understanding of the different aspects, such as the nature, causes and its failure of the revolt. Through this unit you will learn about:

1. The sources that used by the historians for writing the history of this period.
2. The nature of the revolt.
3. The reasons for which the Indian Sepoys and the different sections of Indian society that took part in the event.
4. The leaders that guided the revolt in different regions.
5. The geographical areas that covered by the revolt.
6. The reasons for which the Indians failed to attain success against the British.

## **5.1. Introduction:**

In the unit 4, it was already discussed that the establishment of British role in Indian witnessed a large-scale resistance movement, in the forms of revolts, civil rebellion, popular movements and mutinies right from 1757 onwards to 1856. The pinch of the loss of independence, intrusion of the foreigners in the local affairs, changes in administrative spheres, excessive land revenue and the dislocation of economy was felt in different regions of the country and caused disturbances which was mostly local in character. Among these, the Sanyasi Revolt, Chuar and Ho Risings, Kol Risings, Santhal Rebellion, Bhil Risings, Ramosi Risings etc. were most important. In this unit we shall be discussing about 1857 revolt that was a great shift from the previous revolts or movements.

The establishment of the British rule in India had its adverse effect on the country. The cumulative effects of the British expansionist policies, economic exploitation and administrative innovations made by the British had ruined the position of rulers of Indian states, sepoys, zamindars, peasants, traders, etc. The Lucknow Proclamation pinpointed that the British rule had endangered all the four things dear to Hindus and Muslims alike—religion, honor, life and property. Hence the resentment of the Indian had found expression in the mutinies or movements that mentioned earlier. The simmering discontentment of the Indians burst into a more violent revolt in 1857 that shook the very foundation of the British Empire in India.

The revolt of 1857 was a mighty popular revolt that was the product of the colonial rule. Though the revolt was not a successful one yet it changed the future course of the British Indian administration. As a result of the revolt, the one-hundred-year long administration of the British East India Company had ended here and the charge of the Indian administration was taken by the British Crown with an introduction of a new administrative reorganization that will be discussed in detail in the next unit.

## **5.2. Sources of the Study:**

The events of the revolt are recorded and narrated both in published and unpublished works. They are also found in the writings of the contemporary writers, military officers and many other scholars in the post-revolt period. These records are available in the National archives of India and the Commonwealth Relations Office Library, located in London. Besides that, the proceedings of the foreign department, Home department public proceedings, proceedings of Military department are very useful for the study of the event.

Moreover, the West Bengal Record Office has many papers relating to the event. On the hand, the Punjab Government Record Office has the papers of Rajab Ali, one of the leaders of the revolt. The India Office Library, located in London, has in its possession four volumes of notes and documents used by Sir John Kaye. These volumes have some private papers and correspondence and exceptional interest and value. Besides that, some of the published records (Parliamentary Papers) such as collections of official narratives of Mutiny furnished by the magistrates or commissioners of various localities of 1858, Reports on the engineering operations during the defense of Lucknow in 1857, a short and useful compilation from the Calcutta Government gazette at the Fall of Delhi etc. Besides that, some general works such as a Personal Journal of the Siege of Lucknow by Captain R P Anderson, The Campaign in India by G F Akinson, Indian Gup: Untold Stories of the Indian Mutiny by Rev. J R Baldwin, Eighteen Fifty Seven by Surendra Sen, the Indian Rebellion, Its Causes and and Results by A Duff, the Tale of the Great Mutiny by W H Fitchett etc. are very useful in writing the history of the revolt of 1857.

## **5.3. Nature of the Revolt:**

There is much controversy among the scholars regarding the nature of the revolt. Perhaps, it was a single event in the history of India, which has a divergent opinion regarding its nature. After 1950, historians have focused much whether it was a mutiny, national struggle or manifestation of the feudal reaction. Let us see the essential arguments:

### **5.3.1. It was a Sepoy Mutiny:**

Most of the European writers hold the opinion that it was normally a military rising. John Seeley, John Lawrence, Charles Raikes, Malleeson, Kaye had given the following points in support of their arguments:

- There were many military causes of the revolt such as the Indian sepoys were looked upon with contempt by the English officers. Besides, they received a very meager salaries and allowances compared to their British counterparts. The Indian sepoys thought that within the British military system their religious sentiments were injured.

- On the other hand, the main cause of the revolt was the greased cartridges of the Enfield rifle. It was seen when the British officers ordered the sepoy to use the cartridges tipped with the fats of cows and pigs, the sepoy refused to do the same. It hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindus and Muslims alike.
- Moreover, the revolt started everywhere first by the dissatisfied and disgruntled sepoy and later on they were led by the discontented native rulers. As for example, the sepoy first rose in revolt in March-April, of 1857 at Barrackpore. At Meerut also, the sepoy first started the revolt on 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1857 and then proceeded to Delhi and it became a general revolt at Delhi.
- Besides that, only a few contingents of the sepoy had taken part in the revolt, as for example, the Sikh, the Rajput and the Gurkha regiments did not take part in the revolt. They rather helped the British to suppress the revolt.

But some other writers of the period do not agree with the above-mentioned arguments. No doubt, the above causes motivated the sepoy to take part in revolt but at the same time there were other social, political and economic factors that contributed to the revolt.

### **5.3.2. First War of Independence:**

According to James Outram, the event of 1857 was a joint conspiracy hatched out by the Hindus and Muslims alike. On the other hand, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Ashok Mehta opined that the revolt of 1857 was the “*First War of Independence*”. Pandit Jawarlal Nehru in his work “*Discovery of India*” writes that the Great Rising of 1857, had some nationalist elements in it. According to the view;

- All the sections of the Indian society such as Indian sepoy, the native rulers and Nawabs, the Hindus and Muslims, the rich and poor all helped the rebels. Ashok Mehta remarks that, “*Hindus and Muslims worked together, their blood flowed to intermingled, and differences were forgotten,*”. It is thus evident that the event of 1857 was not only a sepoy mutiny but also a national revolt.
- The Indian women folk also took part in the revolt. At some places, the womenfolk inspired the rebels to fight against the British.
- The European historians argued that only the question of greased cartridges was the cause of the revolt. But it was seen that the Indian public opinion was influenced by various social, economic and political factors. The greased cartridges question was only spark that ignited the material that had been long accumulated in Indian minds.

- At that time the spirit of national awakening was emerging among the Indian at the time of the revolt but it was due to the lack of communication gap, it was not easy for the people to organize themselves in a short span of time. So, the mutiny did not spread the whole country at a single time.

### 5.3.3. Organized Revolt:

It was James Outram and some other scholars hold the opinion that the revolt of 1857 was a Muslim organized revolt which took advantage of the dissatisfied sections of the Hindus. But the view does not hold much ground. Had this revolt been organized only by one community, the people of other communities would not have joined in it. In fact, all the sections of the Indian masses combined together to rise in revolt against the foreign intrusion.

### 5.3.4. Some other Opinion:

- Historian, Dr. R.C. Majumdar in his book, “*The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857*” observes that the revolt was initially started by the sepoys but some disgruntled elements of the society immediately joined to them.
- Dr. S. N Singh in his book “*Eighteen Fifty-Seven*” supports the view that the rebels were not motivated by any national interest, besides, the native sepoys, some orthodox and reactionary elements joined the revolt.
- Dr. S. B. Chaudhry in his book “*Civil Rebellion and the Indian Mutiny*” and “*Theory of Indian Mutiny*” holds the opinion that the rising of the 1857 was a popular uprising.

After critical examination we may conclude that the revolt of 1857 began as sepoy mutiny but very soon it took the form of a national revolt which had encouraged the Indians to start the national movement for the liberation of the country from the British yoke. And most of the national leaders agreed that the revolt of 1857 was the first war of independence.

## Check Your Progress Exercise I

- 1) Mention the important source materials that help in reconstructing the history of the revolt of 1857.

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- 2) Critically examined the nature of the revolt of 1857.

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### **5.4. Causes of the Revolt**

According to the Anglo-Indian historians the importance of the military grievances and the greased cartridges were the most potent factor of the revolt of the 1857. But the modern Indian scholars have established beyond that the greased cartridge was not merely the causes, nor even the most important of them. Instead, the causes of the revolt lay deeper and are to be found in the history of long one hundred years of British East Indian Companies role from the Battle of Plassey. The greased cartridges and the mutiny of the sepoys were merely a match-stick which exploded the inflammable material which had gathered in heap on account of variety of causes such as political, social, religious and economic. Let us sum up the causes of the revolt:

#### **5.4.1. Social and Religious causes:**

- A large section of the Indian population was alarmed by the rapid growth of the Western Civilization in the country. At that time, in 1850, the British changed the Hindu Law of Inheritance enabling a Hindu, who converted in Christianity to inherit his ancestral properties.
- The abolition of some age-old practices observed by the Indians such as the abolition of Sati and female infanticide and the legalization of the widow remarriage were considered as threats to the established social orders.
- The introduction railways and telegraph lines were viewed as suspicious by the Indian.
- The European officers in India were very exacting and over-bearing in their social behavior.
- The Legislative Council of India under the new principle had been constantly nibbling at the religious system of the natives. In its theoretical system of national education, the sacred scriptures had suddenly appeared in the schools.

Hence, the Indian minds were getting increasingly convinced that the English were conspiring to convert them into Christian.

#### **5.4.2. Economic Causes:**

- The annexation of Indian states by the British East India Company had produced startling economic and social effects. The Indian aristocracy had deprived of power and position.
- The British had drained the wealth and natural resources of India for their selfish interest.
- The British administrative mechanism had ruined both the peasantry and landlords.
- Due to British policy of Industrialization, Indian handicrafts collapsed.
- India became a suitable market for finished product that produced in England.
- Pitiably condition of Indian agriculture.
- Imposition of heavy tax.

#### **5.4.3. Political causes:**

- The British East India Companies “effective control” policy and gradual extinction of the Indian native states took a definite shape with the introduction of the perfection of the Subsidiary Alliance System under Lord Wellesley.
- After Wellesley, it was Lord Dalhousie’s Doctrine of Lapse that had caused suspicion and uneasiness in the minds of almost all the ruling princes of India. The policy denied the right of succession of the Indian princess. By applying the policy, Lord Dalhousie had annexed Satara, Jaitapur, Sambalpur, Bhagat, Udaipur, Jhansi and Nagpur.
- On the other hand, Lord Dalhousie annexed Oudh on the pretext of the good governance. This action angered the Company’s sepoys as most of them came from Oudh.
- Regal titles of the Nawabs of Carnatic and Tanjore were abolished and the pension of Peshwa Baji Rao II’s adopted son was stopped.
- Besides that, the Muslim feelings had been grievously hurt as in the year 1856 Lord Canning announced that the prince next in succession would have to renounce the regal title and the ancestral Mughal Places. This act had greatly unnerved the Indian Muslims who thought that the English wanted to humble the House of Timur.

#### **5.4.4. Military causes:**

- Within the Company’s administration the Indian sepoys were mal treated. They were not properly paid in comparison to their British counterpart. Besides that, the sepoys were ill-fed and poorly housed.
- Indian sepoys were prohibited from wearing their sectarian marks, beads or turbans.



- As per the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856, the Indian soldiers were bound to go abroad if required. But at the same time, traditionally, it was a taboo for the Brahmins to cross the seas.
- Moreover, the Indian sepoy's did not able to get higher post in the military department. Along with that the sepoy's were deprived of their allowances.
- The privileges of the free postage so long enjoyed by the sepoy's were withdrawn with the passing of the Post Office Act of 1854. Besides, the disparity in the numbers between European and Indian soldiers had lately been growing greater. All these factors made the Indian soldiers feel that if they had struck at that hour, they had reasonable chances of success.

#### **5.4.4. Immediate cause:**

The introduction of the Enfield rifle was the immediate cause of the revolt of 1857. With its introduction, rumor spread that the cartridges of the said rifle were wrapped in the fats of cow and pig. Interestingly, at the time of the use of the cartridges, it had to be bitten off. As the cows and pigs are prohibited for Hindus and Muslims alike, they refused to use the rifle.

But the refusal of the sepoy's to use the cartridges was regarded as an act of insubordination hence punished accordingly.

On 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1857, the sepoy's at Barrackpore refused to use the greased cartridges and one Brahmin Sepoy, Mangal Pandey, attacked and fired at the Adjutant. Following the event of Barrackpore, the soldiers of the other regions also refused to use the cartridges.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise II**

- 1) Briefly outline the causes of the revolt of 1857.

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- 2) How the annexation policy of Dalhousie became a factor for the revolt?

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### **5.5. The beginning and spread of the Revolt:**

- The revolt of 1857 began at Barrackpore on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1857 where a Brahmin soldier, named Mangal Pandey, urged his fellow soldiers to refuse to use the greased cartridges. The two British, Sergeant Hudson and Lt. Vag had tried to capture Mangal but he shoot down both of them. Later on, Mangal Pandey was hanged on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1857 for revolting. He became the first martyr of the freedom struggle.
- After Barrackpore, on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1857, a total of 85 soldiers of the Native Cavalry at Meerut had refused to use the greased cartridges. Later on, they were court marshaled and sentenced to imprisonment. The event sparked off a general rising among the Indian soldiers stationed at Meerut and on 10<sup>th</sup> May, of the same year, rose in revolt and marched towards Delhi.
- The Meerut soldiers who marched to Delhi entered the city and raised the slogans “victory to *Bahadur Shah*” and the soldiers declared Bahadur Shah as the emperor of India.
- When the news of the occupation of Delhi spread in the country, there were risings in at Lucknow, Aligarh, Banaras, Rohilkhand etc.
- But very soon, Lord Canning sent a large force and seized Delhi and Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II was taken prisoner.
- At Kanpur, the revolt was leaded by Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. Nana Sahib occupied Kanpur in the first week of June and declared himself as the Peshwa.
- In Oudh, the revolt was properly organized and well planned. In organizing the revolt Wajid Ali Shah, Begum Hazarat Mahal, Ahmed Shah, Raja Man Singh and Raja Hanumant Singh played prominent Part. The civilians and soldiers of Oudh gave support to Nawab of Oudh. Begum Hazarat Mahal declared her son Brijis Kadar as the Nawab of Oudh.
- In Central India Jhansi and Gwalior were the main centers of the revolt. At Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, the widow of Raja Gangadhar Rai, rose in revolt. In 1857, she fought against the British like a true heroine with bravery, courage and military skill and drove away the British. After the loss of Kanpur Tanita Tope came and joined with Lakshmi Bai.
- In April 1858, Hugh Rose invaded Jhansi. Rani Lakshmi Bai and Tantia Tope fought battles against the British but were defeated. After defeat, Tantia Tope and Rani left for Gwalior with the hope that the Scindhiya of Gwalior would come and help them. But the same thing did not happen instead Scindhiya joined with the British fought against Rani Lakshmi Bai. On June 11, 1858, in a fierce battle took place and on 17 June Rani died fighting. After that on April, 1858, Tantia Tope was hanged to death.
- Besides that, the revolt also spread to Bareilly (led by Khan Bahadur Khan), Bihar (led by Kunwar Singh), Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

## **5.6. Failure of the Revolt:**

The revolt was though spread rapidly in various regions of India but eventually not successful in ousting the foreign rule from the country for the following reasons:

- The revolt of 1857 was localized, restricted and poorly organized. The Bombay and Madras army remained loyal to the British. Sind and Rajasthan remained quiet and Nepal's help proved of great avail in the suppression of the revolt.
- The resources of the British Empire were far superior to those of the rebels. The Indian soldiers had very few guns and muskets and mostly fought with swords and spears. On the other hand, European soldiers were well equipped.
- The Indian sepoys lacked in leadership.
- On the other hand, the revolt of 1857 was feudal in character. The feudal elements of Oudh, Rohilkhand and some parts of Northern India led the rebellion; on the contrary, other feudal places like the Rajas of Patiala, Jhinda, Gwalior, and Hyderabad helped the Company to suppress the revolt.
- The leaders of the revolt were lacking in experience, organizing ability and concerted operations.
- The rebels had no common ideals before them except the anti-foreign sentiments. Bahadur Shah II was declared the Emperor at Delhi, while at Kanpur and Gwalior Nana Sahib was proclaimed the Peshwa.
- Besides, Hindu-Muslim differences lay dormant against the common enemy, but were not dead.
- The peasants and the inferior castes showed no active sympathies; the soldiers in the Bombay and Madras armies were recruited from the lower castes and they remained loyal to the British.
- Above all, the British East India Company was fortunate in having the services of men of exceptional abilities in the Lawrence brothers, Nicholson, Outram, Havelock, Edward etc. They fought the toughest battles in the initial stages of the revolt and controlled the situation in favor of the British.

## **5.7. Impact of the Revolt:**

Although the revolt of 1857 suppressed completely yet it had shaken the very foundation of the British rule in India. It impacted a lot in the future course of the Indian administration. Let us see the major impacts of the revolt:

- After the revolt, the control of Indian administration was shifted from the East India Company to the British Crown by the Government of India Act, 1858.
- As a result of the revolt the “Board of Control” and the “Court of Directors” were abolished.
- The Queen’s announcement declared against any desire for “extension of territorial possessions” and promised “to respect the rights, dignity and honor of native princes as their own.
- Besides, the Proclamation of 1858 contained an assurance that ‘our subjects, of whatever race or creed, be freely, and impartially admitted to office in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity duly to discharge.
- After the revolt the Indian army was thoroughly reorganized and built up on the policy of “division and counterpoise’.
- After the revolt. It was duly realized that one basic reason of the revolt was the lack of contact between the rulers and ruled. Hence, after the revolt, Sir Brattle Frere, in his famous Minutes of 1860, urged the government ‘the addition of the native elements’ to the Legislative Councils.
- The emotional after-effects of the revolts were perhaps the most unfortunate. Racial bitterness was perhaps the worst legacy of the struggle. The agents of imperialism in India dubbed the entire Indian people as unworthy to trust and subjected them to insults, humiliations and contemptuous treatment. But after the revolt the entire structure of Indian administration was remodeled and based on the idea of a master race. This neo-imperialism was justified by the philosophy of the Whiteman’s-burden and the civilizing role of England in India.
- The revolt of 1857 had ended the era and sowed the seeds of a new era. The era of territorial aggrandizement gave place to the era of economic exploitation.

### Check Your Progress III

1) Mention briefly the geographical limit of the revolt of 1857’

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2) According to you what were the major causes of the failure of the revolt?

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## **5.8. Summary:**

In this unit, attempt has been made to introduce you about the occurrence of the revolt of 1857 in India. After prolonged discussion, it is hoped that you have been able to learn about; the background of the revolt, the political, economic, social and religious, administrative, military and the immediate caused of the revolt. It is also hoped that after going through the Unit you will be able to learn; the geographical limit of the revolt, about the various leaders; caused of the failure of the revolt and the various facets of the impacts such as change in Indian administration, reorganization of the army, the change of attitude of the British towards the Indians, enlistment of the Indians in the Legislative Councils and how the new era opened a new chapter of exploitation in the form of economic exploitations.

## **5.9. Key Words:**

Revolt : take violent action against an established ruler.

Mutiny : an open rebellion against the proper authorities.

Cartridges: a casing containing a charge and a bullet or shoot for small arms.

Sepoy : an Indian soldier serving under British or other European orders.

Peshwa : A Prime Minister of the Maratha Empire.

Nawab : a native governor during the time of the Mughal empire

## **5.10. Answer to CYP**

### **Check Your Progress Exercise I**

- 1) See Section 5.2
- 2) See Section 5.3

### **Check Your Progress Exercise II**

- 1) See Section 5.4
- 2) See Section 5.4.3

### **Check Your Progress Exercise III**

- 1) See Section 5.5
- 2) See Section 5.6

### **5.11. Suggested Readings**

Chandra, Bipan (2019) *History of Modern India*, New Delhi.

Mead, Henry (1857) *The Sepoy Revolt: Its Causes and its Consequences*,

London.Sen, S.N, (2006) *History of Modern India*, New Delhi.

Grover B.L & Grover S, (2007 Reprint) *A New Look at Modern Indian History: From 1707 to the Modern Times*, New Delhi.

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