

UPSC
Old NCERT Summary (Bipan Chandra)
The Revolt of 1857- 1

The Revolt of 1857

A MIGHTY popular revolt broke out in **Northern and Central India in 1857** and nearly swept away the British rule. It began with a mutiny of the sepoys or the Indian soldiers of the Company's army but soon engulfed wide regions and involved the masses.

General Causes

- The Revolt of 1857 was much more than a mere **product of sepoy discontent**. It was in reality a product of the character and policies of colonial rule, of the accumulated grievances of the people against the **Company's administration** and of their dislike for the foreign regime. For over a century, as the British had been conquering the country bit by bit, popular discontent and hatred against foreign rule had been gaining strength among the different **sections of Indian society**. It was this discontent that burst forth into a mighty popular revolt.
- Perhaps the most important cause of the popular discontent was the economic exploitation of the country by the British and the complete destruction of its traditional economic fabric; both impoverished the vast mass of peasants, artisans and handicrafts-men as also a large **number of traditional zamindars and chiefs**. We have traced the disastrous economic impact of early British rule in another chapter.
- Other general causes were the **British land and land revenue policies** and the systems of law and administration. In particular, a large number of peasant proprietors, subjected to exorbitant land revenue demand, **lost their lands to traders and money lenders** and found themselves hopelessly involved in debt. The new landlords, lacking ties of tradition that had linked the old zamindars to peasants, pushed up rents to ruinous heights and evicted them in case of non-payments. The economic decline of the peasantry found expression in twelve major and numerous minor-famines from **1770 to 1857**. Similarly, many zamindars were harassed by demands for higher land revenue and

threatened with forfeiture of their zamindari lands and rights and loss of their status in the villages.

- They resented their loss even more when they were replaced by rank outsiders — officials, merchants and moneylenders. In addition, common people were hard hit by the prevalence of corruption at the lower levels of administration. The police, petty officials and lower law courts were notoriously corrupt. William Edwards, a British official, wrote in 1859 while discussing the causes of the Revolt that the police were “as courage to the people and that **“their oppressions and exactions form one of the chief grounds of dissatisfaction with our government”**”.
- The petty officials lost no opportunity of enriching themselves at the **cost of the ryots and the zamindars**. The complex judicial system enabled the rich to oppress the poor. Flogging, torture and jailing of the cultivators for arrears of rent or land revenue or interest on debt were quite common. Thus the growing poverty of the people made them desperate and led them to join a general revolt in the hope of improving their lot.
- Another basic cause of the unpopularity of British rule was its very foreignness. The British remained perpetual foreigners in the country. They had a feeling of racial superiority and treated Indians with contempt and arrogance. As Syed Ahmad Khan (also Sayyid Ahmad Khan) wrote later: **“Even natives of the highest rank never came into the presence of officials but with an inward fear and trembling”**. Their main aim was to enrich themselves and then go back to Britain along with their wealth. The people of India were aware of this basically foreign character of the new rulers. They refused to recognize the British as their benefactors and looked with suspicion upon every act of theirs. They had thus a vague sort of anti-British feeling which had found expression even earlier than the **Revolt in numerous popular uprisings against the British**.
- The **annexation of Awadh by Lord Dalhousie in 1856** was widely resented in India in general and in Awadh in particular. More specifically, it created an atmosphere of rebellion in Awadh and in the Company’s army. Dalhousie’s action angered the **Company’s sepoys, 75,000** of whom came from Awadh. Lacking an all-India feeling, these sepoys had helped the British conquer the rest of India. But they did not possess regional and local patriotism and did not like that their homelands should come under the foreigner’s sway. Moreover, the annexation of Awadh adversely affected the sepoy’s purse. He had to pay **higher taxes on the land his family held in Awadh**.
- The excuse Dalhousie had advanced for annexing Awadh was that he wanted to free the people from the **Nawab’s mismanagement and**

taluqdars oppression, but, in practice, the people got no relief. Indeed, the common man had now to pay higher land revenue and additional taxes on articles of food, houses, ferries, opium, and justice. The dissolution of the Nawab's administration and army threw out of jobs thousands of nobles, gentlemen and officials together with their retainers and officers and soldiers, and created unemployment in almost every peasant's home. These dispossessed taluqdars, numbering **nearly 21,000, anxious to regain their lost estates and position**, became the most dangerous opponents of the British rule.

- The annexation of Awadh, along with the other annexations of Dalhousie, created panic among rulers of the native states. This policy of annexation and subordination was, for example, directly responsible for making Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi and Bahadur Shah their staunch enemies. **Nana Sahib was the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa**. The British refused to grant for Nana Sahib the pension they were paying to Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa, and forced him to live at Kanpur, far away from his family seat at Poona. Similarly, the British insistence on the annexation of Jhansi -incensed the proud Rani Lakshmibai who wanted her adopted son to succeed her deceased husband. The house of the Mughals was humbled when **Dalhousie announced in 1849** that the successor to Bahadur Shah would have to abandon the historic Red Fort and move to a humbler residence at the **Qutab on the outskirts in 1856**, Canning announced that after Bahadur Shah's death the Mughals would lose the title of kings and would be known as mere princes.
- An important factor in turning the people against British rule was their fear that it endangered their religion. This fear was largely due to the activities of the Christian missionaries who were **"to be seen everywhere — in the schools, in the hospitals, in the prisons and at the market places"**. These missionaries tried to convert people and made violent and vulgar public attacks on Hinduism and Islam. The actual conversions made by them appeared to the people as living proofs of the threat to their religion. Popular suspicion that the alien Government supported the activities of the missionaries was strengthened by certain acts of the Government and the actions of some of its officials. In 1850, the Government enacted a law which enabled a convert to Christianity to inherit his ancestral property. Moreover, the Government maintained at its cost chaplains or Christian priests in the army. Many officials, civil as well as military, considered it the irreligious duty to encourage **missionary propaganda and to provide instruction in Christianity in government schools** and even in jails.

- The conservative religious and social sentiments of many people were also hurt by some of the humanitarian measures which the Government had undertaken on the advice of Indian reformers. They believed that an alien Christian government had no right to interfere in their religion and customs. The **abolition of the custom of Sati, the legalisation of widow remarriage, and the opening of Western education to girls** appeared to them as examples of such undue interference. The Revolt of 1857 started with the mutiny of the Company's sepoys. The sepoys were after all a part of Indian society and, therefore, felt and suffered to some extent what other Indians did. The hopes, -sires, and, despairs of the other sections of society, especially the peasantry, were reflected in them. an Act was passed under which every new recruit undertook to serve even overseas. if required. This hurt the sepoys sentiments as, according to the current religious beliefs of the Hindus, travel across the sea was forbidden and led to loss of caste.
- The sepoys also had **numerous other grievances**. A wide gulf had come 'into existence between the officers and the sepoys who were often treated with contempt by their British officers. A more immediate cause of the **sepoys' dissatisfaction** was the recent order that they would not be given the foreign sender allowance (baita) when **serving in Sindh or in the Punjab**. This order resulted in a big cut in the salaries of a large number of them. The annexation of Awadh, the home of many sepoys, further inflamed their feelings.

The Immediate Cause

By 1857, the material for a mass upheaval was ready, only a spark was needed to set it afire, The episode of the greased cartridges provided this spark for the sepoys and their mutiny provided the general populace the occasion to revolt. The new Enfield rifle had been first introduced in the army. Its cartridges had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off before the cartridge was loaded into the rifle. The grease was in some instances composed of beef and pig fat. The sepoys, Hindu as well as Muslim, were enraged. The use of the greased cartridges would endanger their religion. Many of them believed that the Government was deliberately trying to destroy their religion and convert them to Christianity. The time to rebel had come.

The Beginning and Course of the Revolt

- The Revolt began at Meerut, **58 km from Delhi, on 10 May 1857** and then, gathering force rapidly it cut across Northern India as if like sword, It

soon embraced a vast area from the Punjab in the north and the Narmada in the south to Bihar in the east and Rajputana in the west.

- Even before the outbreak at Meerut, Mangal Pandey had become a martyr at Barrackpore. Mangal Pandey, a young soldier, was hanged on 29 March 1857 for revolting single-handed and attacking his superior officers. And then came the explosion at Meerut. **On 24 April, ninety men of the 3rd Native Cavalry** refused to accept the greased cartridges.
- **On 9 May, eighty-five** of them were dismissed, sentenced to 10 years imprisonment and put into fetters. This sparked off a general mutiny among the Indian soldiers, stationed at Meerut. The very next day, on 10 May, they released their imprisoned comrades, killed their officers, and unfurled the banner of revolt. As if drawn by a magnet, they set off for Delhi after sunset. When the **Meerut soldiers appeared in Delhi the next morning**, the local infantry joined them, killed their own European officers, and seized the city.
- The rebellious soldiers now proclaimed the aged and powerless Bahadur Shah the Emperor of India. Delhi was soon to become the centre of the **Great Revolt and Bahadur Shah** its great symbol. This spontaneous raising of the last Mughal king to the leadership of the country was recognition of the fact that the long reign of the Mughal dynasty had made it the traditional symbol of India's political unity. With this single act, the **sepoys had transformed a mutiny of soldiers into a revolutionary**. This is why rebellious sepoys from all over the country automatically turned their steps towards Delhi and all Indian chiefs who took part in the Revolt hastened to proclaim their loyalty to the **Mughal Emperor**. Bahadur Shah, in turn, under the instigation and perhaps the pressure of the sepoys, and after initial vacillation wrote letters to all the chiefs and rulers of India urging them to organize a confederacy of Indian states to fight and replace the British regime.
- 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. In many of the princely states, rulers remained loyal to their British overlord but the soldiers revolted or remained on the brink of revolt. Many of Indians troops rebelled and joined the sepoys. Similarly over **20,000 of Gwalior's troops** went over to Tantia (Tatya) Tope and the Rani of Jhansi. Many small chiefs of Rajasthan and Maharashtra revolted with the support of the people who were quite hostile to the British. Local rebellions also occurred in Hyderabad and Bengal.
- The tremendous sweep and breadth of the Revolt was matched by its depth. Everywhere in Northern and Central India, the mutiny of the sepoys triggered popular revolts of the civilian population. After the

sepoys had destroyed British authority, the common people rose up in arms often fighting with spears and axes, bows and arrows, lathis and sickles, and crude muskets. They took advantage of the Revolt to destroy the money-lenders' account books and records of debts. They also attacked the British established law courts, revenue offices (tehsils) and revenue records, and thanas. It is of some importance to note that in many of the battles commoners far surpassed the sepoys in numbers. According to one estimate, of the total number of about **150,000 men who died fighting the English in Awadh**, over 100,000 were civilians.

- The popular character of the Revolt of 1857 also became evident when the British ferried to crush it. They had to wage a vigorous and ruthless war not only against the rebellious sepoys but also against- the people of **Delhi Awadh, North-Western Provinces and Agra, Central India's arid Western Bihar**, burning entire villages and massacring villagers and urban people.
- Much of the **strength of the Revolt of 1857** lay in Hindu-Muslim unity. Among the soldiers and the people as well as among the leaders there was complete cooperation as between Hindus and Muslims. All the rebels recognized Bahadur Shah, a Muslim, as their Emperor. Also the first thoughts of the Hindu sepoys at Meerut was to march straight to Delhi. The Hindu and Muslim rebels and sepoys respected each other's sentiments. For example, wherever the Revolt was successful, orders were immediately issued banning cow - slaughter out of respect for Hindu sentiments. Moreover, Hindus and Muslims were equally well represented at all levels of the leadership. The role of Hindu-Muslim unity in the Revolt was indirectly acknowledged later by Aitchison, a senior British official, complained: **"In this instance we could not play off the Mohammedans against the Hindus"**. In fact the events of 1857 clearly bring out that the people and politics of India were basically not communal in medieval times and before 1858.
- The storm-centres of the Revolt of 1857 were at **Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi, and Arrah in Bihar**. At Delhi the nominal and symbolic leadership belonged to the Emperor Bahadur Shah, but the real command lay with a Court of Soldiers headed by General Bakht Khan who had led the revolt of the Bareilly troops and brought them to Delhi. In the British army he had been an ordinary subedar of artillery. Bakht Khan represented the popular and plebeian element at the headquarters of the Revolt. The Emperor Bahadur Shah was perhaps the weakest link in the chain of leadership of the Revolt. His weak personality, old age and lack of qualities of leadership, created political weakness at the nerve centre of the Revolt and did incalculable damage to it.

- At Kanpur the Revolt was led by Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa. Nana Sahib expelled the English from help of the sepoys and proclaimed himself the Peshwa. At the same time he acknowledged Bahadur Shah as the Emperor of India and declared himself to be his Governor. The chief burden of fighting on **behalf of Revolt was Nana Sahib fell on the shoulders of Tantia Tope**, one of his most loyal servants, Tantia Tope has won immortal fame by his patriotism, determined lighting, and skillful guerrilla operations. Azimullah was another loyal servant of Nana Sahib. He was an expert in political propaganda Unfortunately, Nana Sahib tarnished his brave record by deceitfully killing the British garrison at Kanpur after he had agreed to give them safe conduct.
- The revolt at Lucknow was led by Hazrat Mahal, the Begum of Awadh, who had proclaimed her **young son, Birjis Qadr**, as the Nawab of Awadh. Helped by the sepoys at Lucknow, and by the zamindars and peasants of Awadh, the Begum, organized an. all-out attack on the British, Compelled to give up the city, the latter entrenched themselves in the Residency building. In the end, the siege of the Residency failed, as the small British garrison fought back with exemplary fortitude and valor.
- One of the great leaders of the **Revolt of 1857s** and perhaps one of the greatest heroines of Indian history, was the young **Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi**. The young Rani joined the rebels when the British refused to acknowledge right to adopt an heir to the Jhansi 's gaddi, annexed her state, and threatened to treat her as an instigator of the rebellion of the sepoys at Jhansi - The Rani vacillated for some time. But once she had decided to throw in her lot with the rebels, she fought valiantly at the head of her troops.
- Tales of her bravery and courage and military' skill have inspired her countrymen ever since. Driven out of **Jhansi by the British forces** after a fierce battle in which "even women were seen working the batteries and distributing ammunition', she administered the oath to her followers that 'with our own hands we shall not our Azad shahi (independent rule) bury". She captured Gwalior with the help of Tantia Tope and her trusted Afghan guards Maharaja Sindhia, loyal to the British, made an attempt to fight the Rani but most of his troops deserted to her. Sindhia sought refuge with the **English at Agra**. The brave Rani died fighting on 17 June 1858, clad in the battle dress of a soldier and mounted on a companion, a Muslim girl.
- Kunwar Singh, a ruined and discontented zamindar of Jagdishpur near Arrah, was the chief organizer of the Revolt in Bihar. Though nearly 80 years old, he 'as perhaps the most outstanding military leader and strategist of the Revolt. **Maulvi Ahmadullah of Faizabad** was another

outstanding leader of the Revolt. He was a native of Madras where he had started preaching armed rebellion. In **January 1857** he moved towards the north to Faizabad where he fought a large-scale battle against a company of British troops sent to stop him from preaching sedition. When the general revolt broke out in May, he emerged as one of its acknowledged leaders in Awadh.

- The greatest heroes of the Revolt were, however, the sepoys, many of whom displayed great courage in the field of battle and thousands of whom unselfishly laid down their lives. More than anything else, it was their determination and sacrifice that nearly led to the expulsion of the **British from India**. In this patriotic struggle, they sacrificed even their deep religious prejudices. They had revolted on the question of the greased cartridges but now to expel the hated foreigner they freely used the same cartridges in their battles.