

UPSC
Old NCERT Summary (Bipan Chandra)
The Revolt of 1857- 2

THE WEAKNESSES OF THE REVOLT AND ITS SUPPRESSION

- Even though spread over a vast territory and widely popular among the people, the Revolt of 1857 could not embrace the entire country or all the groups and classes of Indian society- It did not spread to South India and most of Eastern and Western India because these regions had repeatedly rebelled earlier. Most rulers of the Indian states and the big zamindars selfish to the core and fearful of British might, refused to join in .
- On the contrary, the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkar of Indore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Raja of Jodhpur and other Rajput rulers, the Nawab of Bhopal, the rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, and other Sikh chieftains of Punjab, the Maharaja of Kashmir, the Ranas of Nepal, and many other ruling chiefs, and a large number of big zamindars gave active help to the British in suppressing the Revolt. In fact, no more than one per cent of the chiefs of India joined the Revolt. Governor General Canning later remarked that these rulers and chiefs “acted- as the breakwaters to the storm which would have otherwise swept us in one great wave”.
- Madras, Bombay Bengal and the Western Punjab remained undisturbed, even though the popular feeling in—these provinces favoured ‘the rebels. Moreover, except for the discontented and the dispossessed zamindars, the middle and upper classes were mostly critical of the rebels; most of the propertied classes were either cool towards them or actively hostile to them. Even many of the taluqdars (big zamindars) of Awadh, who had joined the Revolt, abandoned it once the Government gave them an assurance that their estates would be returned to them, This made it very difficult for the peasants and soldiers of Awadh to sustain a prolonged guerrilla campaign.
- The money-lenders were the chief targets of the villagers attacks. They were, therefore, naturally hostile to the Revolt. The merchants, too, gradually became unfriendly. The rebels were compelled to impose heavy taxation on them in order to finance the war or to seize their stocks of foodstuffs to feed the army. The merchants often hid their wealth and goods and refused to give free supplies to the rebels. The

zamindars of Bengal also remained loyal to the British. They were after all a creation of the British. Moreover, the hostility of Bihar peasants towards their zamindars frightened the Bengal zamindars. Similarly, the big merchants of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras supported the British because their main profits came from foreign trade and economic connections with the British merchants.

- The modern educated Indians also did not support the Revolt. They were repelled by the rebels' appeals to superstitions and their opposition to progressive social measures. As we have seen, the educated Indians wanted to end the backwardness of their country. They mistakenly believed that the British rule would help them accomplish these tasks of modernization while rebels, led by zamindars, old rulers and chieftains and other feudal elements, would take the country backward. Only later did the educated Indians learn from experience that foreign rule was incapable of modernizing the country and that it would instead impoverish it and keep it backward.
- The revolutionaries of 1857 proved to be more farsighted in this respect; they had a better, instinctive understanding of the evils of foreign rule and of the necessity to get rid of it. On the other hand, they did not realise, as did the educated intelligentsia, that the country had fallen prey to foreigners precisely because it had stuck to rotten and outmoded customs, traditions and institutions. They failed to see that national salvation lay not in going back to feudal monarchy but in going forward to a modern society, a modern economy, scientific education and modern political institutions. In any case, it cannot be said that the educated Indians were anti-national or loyal to a foreign regime. As events after 1858 were to show, they were soon to lead a powerful and modern national movement against British rule.
- Whatever the reasons for the disunity of Indians, it was to prove fatal to the Revolt. But this was not the only weakness from which the cause of the rebels suffered. They were short of modern weapons and other materials of war. Most of them fought with such ancient weapons as pikes and swords.

They were also poorly organised. The sepoys were brave and selfless but they were also ill-disciplined. Sometimes they behaved more like a riotous mob than a disciplined army. The rebel units did not have common plans of military action, or authoritative heads, or centralized leadership. The uprisings in different parts of the country were completely uncoordinated. The leaders were joined together by a common feeling of hatred for the alien rule but by nothing else.

- Once they overthrew British power from an area, they did not know what sort of political power or institutions to create in its place. They were suspicious and jealous of one another and often indulged in suicidal quarrels. Similarly, the peasantry having destroyed revenue records and money lenders books, and overthrown the new zamindars, became passive, not knowing what to do next.
- In fact, the weakness of the Revolt went deeper than the failings of individuals. The movement had little understanding of colonialism, which had overpowered India, or of the modern world. It lacked a forward looking programme, coherent ideology, a political perspective or a vision of the future society and economy. The Revolt represented no societal alternative to be implemented after the capture of power. The diverse elements which took part in the Revolt were united only by their hatred of British rule, but each of them had different grievances and differing conceptions of the politics of free India. This absence of a modern and progressive programme enabled the reactionary princes and zamindars to seize the levers of power of the revolutionary movement. But the feudal character of the Revolt should not be stressed over much.
- Gradually the soldiers and the people were beginning to evolve a different type of leadership. The very effort to make the Revolt a success was compelling them to create new types of organisation. For example, at Delhi, a court of administrators, consisting of ten members, six army men and four civilians, was established. All its decisions were taken by a majority vote. The court took all military and administrative decisions in the name of the Emperor. Similar efforts to create new organisational structures were made in other centres of the rebellion. As Benjamin Disraeli warned the British Government at the time, if they did not suppress the Revolt in time, they would “find other characters on the stage, with whom to contend, besides the princess of India.
- In the end, British imperialism, with a developing capitalist economy and at the height of its power the world over, and supported by most of the Indian princes and chiefs, proved militarily too strong for the rebels. The British Government poured immense supplies of men, money and arms into the country, though Indians had later to repay the entire cost of their own suppression. The Revolt was suppressed. Sheer courage could not win against a powerful and determined enemy who planned its every step. The rebels were dealt an early blow when the British captured Delhi on 20 September 1857 after prolonged and bitter fighting. The aged Emperor Bahadur Shah was taken prisoner. The Royal Princes were captured and butchered on the spot. The Emperor was tried and exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862, lamenting bitterly

- the fate which had buried him far away from the city of his birth. Thus the great House of the Mughals was finally and completely extinguished.
- With the fall of Delhi the focal point of the Revolt disappeared. The other leaders of the Revolt carried on the brave but unequal struggle, with the British mounting a powerful offensive against them. John Lawrence, Outram, Havelock, Neil, Campbell, and Hugh Rose were some of the British commanders who earned military fame in the course of this campaign. One by one, all the great leaders of the Revolt fell. Nana Sahib was defeated at Kanpur. Defiant to the very end and refusing to surrender, he escaped to Nepal early in 1859, never to be heard of again. Tantia Tope escaped into the jungles of Central India where he carried out bitter and brilliant guerrilla warfare until April 1859 when he was betrayed by a zamindar friend and captured while asleep. He was put to death after a hurried trial on 15 April 1859. The Rani of Jhansi had died on the field of battle earlier on 17 June 1858. By 1859, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Rao Sahib, brother of Nana Sahib, and Maulavi Ahmadullah were all dead, while the Begum of Awadh was compelled to hide in Nepal.
 - By the end of 1859, British authority over India was fully re-established, but the Revolt had not been in vain. It is a glorious landmark in our history. Though it was a desperate effort to save India in the old way and under traditional leadership, it was the first great struggle of the Indian people for freedom from British imperialism, it paved the way for the rise of the modern national movement. The heroic and patriotic struggle of 1857, and the series of rebellions preceding it, left an unforgettable impression on the minds of the Indian people, established valuable local traditions of resistance to British rule, and served as a perennial source of inspiration in their later struggle for freedom. The heroes of the Revolt soon became household names in the country, even though the very mention of their names was frowned upon, by the rulers.