

## Chapter

# 1

## Popular Uprisings up to 1857

In previous units, you learnt about the establishment of British rule in India and its impact on different spheres of Indian life. A question that assumes importance now is, how did the people react to this new rule and the changes that it brought about?

The establishment of British rule in India was not a sudden event but a slow and gradual process comprising many wars and conquests, resulting in forceful subjugation of the Indian people. Naturally it was a process resented and resisted at every stage. The British introduced rapid changes, which had adverse impact on various aspects of Indian life. Consequently, people reacted to this new rule in two broad way.

1. In the form of popular uprisings (i.e. revolts, rebellions, peasant and tribal movements) (Covered in this Unit)

2. In the form of socio-cultural reform movements (Covered in Unit 5)

This unit attempts to examine the various popular uprisings that emerged in different parts of the country till 1900. In this chapter, uprisings during the first 100 years of colonial rule, i.e. from 1757 till 1857, have been covered.

A series of popular resistance run like a thread throughout the first 100 years of colonial rule. During this period, the simmering discontent of the people broke out in three broad forms— civil rebellions, tribal uprisings and peasant movements. Whatever may be their immediate cause, these uprisings were directed against the common experience of oppression, brought about by the colonialists and their indigenous supporters. Though these uprisings were localised in varying degrees, they emerged as the first expression of protest against the oppressive foreign rule and formed a significant prelude to the Revolt of 1857, also referred to as the 'First War of Independence'.

**Civil Rebellions:** Civil Rebellions were generally led by the rulers or their descendants, officials and retainers of the conquered Indian states as well as by impoverished landlords and poligars (landed military magnates in South India). The mass base of these rebellions was provided by ruined peasants, artisans and soldiers.

**Who were they?**

**The Peasants:** The term 'peasant' refers to a small farmer or a farm labourer. The peasants were the sons of soil, i.e. all those who were directly engaged in agricultural production.



Indian peasants



**The Tribals:** The term 'tribal' or 'adivasi' refers to the earliest inhabitant of a region. The tribals generally lived in deep forests or hilly areas and shared a close bond with their land, forest and forest resources. The tribal peasants combined agriculture with hunting and food gathering and even manufacturing from forest-based products. Their relative isolation and closer ethnic bonds differentiated them from peasants.

**The Artisans:** Artisans are workers involved in manufacture of goods by hands, like cotton, wood and iron products. Mostly, these skilled professions were pursued as caste professions. Historical evidence about them is extremely limited. They are often clubbed with peasants and tribals.

### CAUSES OF THE PRE-1857 UPRISINGS

Even during the Mughal times, popular protests against the rulers and their officials were not uncommon and various factors including high land revenue, harsh practices of tax collectors and other corrupt practices prevailing at the time forced the people to rise in revolt.

However, the establishment of British rule had a far more devastating impact on the lives of various sections of Indian people, forcing them to rise in revolt against the colonial rule:

#### ● Devastating impact on rulers and zamindars:

- Several Rajas and Nawabs lost their principalities owing to the Company's policy of expansion. Thousands of zamindars and poligars were **uprooted**; their rights taken over by the colonial state. Often, they were forced to sell their rights due to inability to pay higher revenues.

#### ● Devastating impact on peasants:

- The Company introduced rapid changes in administration and land revenue system, disrupting agrarian society.
- The new land settlements (Permanent, Ryotwari and Mahalwari) created new types of land ownerships. The new landlords were bereft of traditional paternalism towards their tenants and raised rents to unbearable heights. For instance, in Bengal in less than 30 years of British rule, land revenue collection was raised to nearly double the amount collected under the Mughals.
- Further, the colonial rulers insisted payment of revenue in cash, encouraging money lending practices which often resulted in heavy peasant **indebtedness** and **landlessness**.
- To make matters worse, not even a part of the collected revenue was spent on the welfare of the cultivator or development of agriculture.
- The new land settlements also did away with certain customary rights like forest and pasturage rights.
- Though class differences were not a new feature, the colonial policies **accentuated the class differences** between those who owned land and wealth and those who did not. Further, class differences also accentuated polarisation along the lines of caste and religion. For instance, if in an area, the landowner belonged to a particular caste or religion, and peasants to another, their **caste/communal differences got strained**.

- As per colonial policy, India was to be a supplier of raw materials for British industries. Hence agriculture was forcibly commercialised. Peasants were forced to grow cash crops like indigo and cotton instead of food grains, even in years of food grain scarcity, resulting in increased peasant exploitation and even **famines**. In fact, the period during 1770 and 1857 witnessed 12 major and several minor famines, endorsing the decline of Indian peasantry.
- The new judicial and administrative systems further encouraged the rich to oppress the poor. Cultivators were **flogged, tortured** and **jailed** for non-payment of rent, taxes and interests.
- Corruption in lower levels of judiciary and administration made the life of the common man miserable.
- **Devastating impact on artisans:**
  - Colonialism also spelt doom for Indian artisans. As per the colonial policy, India was to be a market for British goods. These machine-made British goods were cheaper and finer than those made by Indian artisans. Without demand for their handmade goods, the Indian artisans were thrown into **unemployment**.
  - Further, while India was flooded with British manufactures, discriminatory tariffs were levied against Indian goods in Britain, ruining Indian handloom and handicraft industry both ways.
  - Misery of the artisans was further compounded by the disappearance of their traditional patrons and buyers—the princes, chieftains and landlords.
  - Destruction of indigenous industry led to large scale migrations from industry to agriculture (a process called **peasantisation**) with no simultaneous improvement in agriculture. This further increased pressure on land.
- **Devastating impact on tribals:**
  - The colonial administration **ended the relative isolation** of tribals and brought them within the ambit of colonial economy and exploitation.
  - It intruded into tribal polity, **encroached upon tribal lands** and transformed tribal relationship with land and forests.
  - It recognized the tribals as zamindars and introduced new land revenue system, **taxed tribal products**.
  - The tribals had traditionally practiced shifting cultivation or jhum. The colonial administration disallowed this practice by restricting tribal access to new forest lands and forest products.
  - The colonial administration introduced a large number of **outsiders** among the tribals. These included middlemen such as the traders, revenue farmers and money lenders who pulled the tribals into the very centre of colonial exploitation.
  - The money lenders gradually pushed the tribals into **indebtedness** and **landlessness**. As a result, the tribals were reduced to the position of farm labourers and tenants on land that had traditionally belonged to them. It also intensified the process of **peasantisation**.
  - The revenue farmers intensified the system of **begar**. The policemen and petty officers were notoriously corrupt and apathetic towards everyone including the tribals.



- The colonial administration also encouraged influx of **Christian missionaries** into tribal regions.
- **Devastating impact on scholarly and priestly class:**
  - The traditional rulers had provided generous patronage to pandits and maulvis as well as to men of art and literature in their courts. With the conquest of Indian states by the British, this **patronage came to an end** resulting in wide scale displacement and consequent impoverishment of the scholarly and priestly classes. These uprooted men also played an active role in inciting feelings of hatred and rebellion against the foreign rulers.
- **Colonial nature of the Company's rule:**
  - Another major cause of the uprisings was the very foreign character of the Company's rule. The Company's officials remained **perpetual foreigners** in India, whose only aim was to amass as much wealth as possible and return to England.
  - The people had begun to feel that they were being ruled by foreigners from a distant land and who were draining their own land of its wealth with the effect that the English enjoyed the fruits of production while Indian masses faced worst forms of poverty.

Thus it is clear that the Company's rule had an adverse impact on the lives of almost all sections of Indian people. The exploitative colonial practices lead to massive impoverishment of Indian peasants and discontentment amongst tribes, forcing them to rise in revolt against British administration.

### IMPORTANT POPULAR UPRISINGS

Naturally, the rebellions occurred in one area after another as it was incorporated under the Company's rule, beginning from Bengal. During the 100 years from 1757 to 1857, there occurred more than 40 major rebellions apart from several minor ones. These uprisings were in the nature of protests, revolts and rebellions and were known differently as **fituris, melis, hools** and **ulgulan**.

### Revolts in Bengal and Eastern India

#### Sanyasi-Fakir Rebellion (Bengal-Bihar, 1763-1800)

The establishment of British rule in Bengal in 1757 was followed by widespread plunder by the East India Company, ruining peasants, artisans and zamindars alike. The Bengal famine of 1770 was seen as a direct result of foreign rule and its callousness.

The Sanyasis and Fakirs (Hindu and Muslim holy men), with the tradition of fighting against oppression, took up the popular cause and organised raids on the Company's factories and treasuries. Sometimes they would distribute the looted wealth among the poor. They even established independent government in Bogra and Mymensingh. Another noteworthy feature of the movement was equal participation of the Hindus and the Muslims.

After the Bengal famine, the Sanyasis were joined by a large number of uprooted zamindars, disbanded soldiers, dispossessed peasants and rural poor. They moved around in parts of Bengal and Bihar in bands of five to seven thousand and adopted guerrilla techniques of attack.

As per the official records of the East India Company, 'A set of lawless banditti under the name of Sanyasis and Fakirs have long infested these countries and under the pretence of religious pilgrimage, have been accustomed to traverse the chief parts of Bengal, begging, stealing and plundering wherever they go.'

Main leader(s): **Musa Shah, Majnu Shah, Bhawani Pathak** and **Debi Chaudharani**.

**Suppression:** The Sanyasi and the British forces regularly clashed with each other in Bengal and Bihar until 1800. The British finally succeeded in containing the Sanyasi raids after prolonged military action under **Warren Hastings**.

The Sanyasi Rebellion was made famous by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novel **Anand Math**.

#### Chuar Rebellion (Midnapur, 1766-72, 1795-1816)

Chuar tribesmen of Midnapur district rose in rebellion several times in the context of famine and increasing land revenue demands.

#### Peasant Uprising of Rangpur and Dinajpur (Bengal, 1783)

Rangpur and Dinajpur were two districts of northern Bengal which faced all kinds of oppression by the East India Company and its revenue contractors. One such contractor was Debi Singh, who along with his agents exercised a reign of terror in the two districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. In order to extract taxes, they often resorted to beating and flogging the peasants and even burnt down their houses.

When the peasants' appeals to the Company officials for help fell on deaf ears, they decided to take the law in their own hands. They elected Dirjinarain as their leader, armed themselves with their swords, sickles, bows and arrows, attacked the contractor's agents and looted their granaries. They even formed a government of their own, stopped payment of all revenues to the government and even levied insurrection charges or **dhing kharcha** to meet rebellion expenses. Hindus and Muslims participated in equal numbers in this uprising as well.

Main leader: **Dirjinarain**

**Suppression:** The uprising was finally suppressed by the British by use of military force.

#### Ho and Munda Rising (Chota Nagpur and Singhbhum, 1820-37)

Ho and Munda tribesmen challenged the Company's forces several times during 1820 and 1837.

#### The Kol Uprising (Chota Nagpur Plateau, 1820-37)

The Kol tribesmen of Singhbhum had long enjoyed independent existence under their tribal chiefs. Following British occupation of Singhbhum, the British began to intrude into the life of the Kols. They not only tried to impose their own jurisdiction, even outsiders (including Sikh and Muslim farmers) began to settle in this area, resulting in occupation of tribal lands by outsiders.



Such activities were much resented by the Kols and their discontentment broke out in the form of an uprising in 1831 directed against the outsiders. The rebels killed around 1000 outsiders, burnt down their houses and looted their property. The rebellion quickly spread to adjoining Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamu and Manbhum and was finally suppressed only after large-scale military operations of the British forces. Thousands of Kols were massacred before British authority could be restored.

#### Pagal Panthis Revolt (Bengal, 1825)

Pagal Panthis belonged to a semi-religious sect founded by Karam Shah of north Bengal. His son and successor **Tipu Shah** was driven by both religious as well as political motives and took up the cause of the tenants against the oppressive zamindars. In 1825, Tipu captured Sherpur and assumed royal power. The insurgency soon spread to adjoining areas and the region remained disturbed in until 1830s and 1840s.

#### The Ahoms' Revolt (Assam, 1828)

After the end of Anglo Burma war (1824–26), the Ahom nobility of Assam accused the British Company of breaking its promise and not withdrawing from their territory. Feeling threatened that the Company intended to include Ahom territory in its dominion, the Ahoms rose in revolt. In 1828, the Ahoms declared Gomdhar Konwar as their king and planned a march to Rangpur.

Main leader: **Gomdhar Konwar**

**Suppression:** The revolt was suppressed in the face of superior military might of the Company. But later the Company followed a pacific policy, and in 1833 handed over upper Assam to Maharaj Purander Singh Narendra and part of kingdom was restored to the Assamese King.

#### Khasi Revolt (Khasi Hills, 1829)

The East India Company occupied Khasi hills, lying between Jaintia and Garo hills. They also planned to build a military road, linking Brahmaputra valley with Sylhet and stationed a large number of outsiders including Englishmen, Bengalis and labourers to complete the project. Tirat Singh, the Khasi king and the ruler of Nunklow, resented this intrusion by the British and launched an attack on a British garrison, which soon developed into a full-blown revolt against the British rule in the region.

Main leader: **Tirat Singh**

**Suppression:** The British successfully suppressed the revolt in 1833.

#### The Faraizi Disturbances (Eastern Bengal, 1838–51)

The Faraizi sect was founded by **Haji Shariatullah of Faridpur** in eastern Bengal. The Faraizi movement originally began as a peasant movement directed against the landlords and the British oppressors. However, under the leadership of Dudu Mian (son of the founder), the Faraizis turned into a religious sect, advocating radical religious and socio-political changes. Dudu Mian propagated an egalitarian ideology that all men are equal and that all land belongs to God and no one has the right to levy tax on it. He took upon himself the task of driving away the British

intruders from Bengal. The Faraizis opposed the right of the zamindars to collect tax, set up parallel government in some parts of Bengal and even established village courts.

Main leader: **Dudu Mian**

**Suppression:** The movement was finally crushed by the government forces and ended in the arrest of Dudu Mian. The Faraizi disturbances continued till 1857 and most of the Faraizis later joined the ranks of the Wahabis.

#### Khond Uprising (Orissa, 1837–56)

The British tried to put an end to the Khond practice of human sacrifice (mariah), first through persuasion and later through force. This was resented by the Khonds who retaliated under **Chakra Bisoi**. The uprising covered the regions of Kalahandi, Patana, Ghumsar and China-ki-Medi. Bisoi could never be arrested.

#### Savara Rebellion (Orissa, 1856–57)

The Savara tribesmen of Parliakhemedi rebelled under the leadership of **Radhakrishna Dandasena**. The colonial administration saw links between Chakra Bisoi and the Savara rebellion which was crushed with the hanging of Dandasena in 1857.

#### Santhal Rebellion (Rajmahal Hills, 1855–56)

The Santhal **hool** or 'uprising' was the most massive of all tribal revolts. The people of the Santhal tribe inhabited the region between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal, known as '**Daman-i-koh**', covering the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Bankura, Murshidabad, Pakur, Purnea, Dumka, Bhagalpur and Monghyr.

In 1793, Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal. Under this system, the land of the tribals which they had cultivated for centuries was handed over to the zamindars. These zamindars raised the rent to excessive heights. The moneylenders, who were mostly from Bengal and upper India, started their usurious practices. In this way, outsiders (called **Dikus** by the Santhals) began to intrude into the Santhal territory and disturbed their traditional way of life, forcing the Santhals to retreat to the Rajmahal Hills.

The Santhal's main resentment was against the usurious people from Bengal, but they turned against the government when they saw that the government officials were hand in gloves with their oppressors. The landlords, money lenders, merchants together with revenue officials and police subjected the Santhals to all sorts of exploitation including illegal extortions, dispossession from property and even personal violence.

The timid and yielding Santhals severely resented the treatment meted out to them by the dikus (outsiders). Their growing discontent broke out in open insurrections under the leadership of brothers Sidhu and Kanhu. The leaders claimed that Thakur (God) had communicated with them and asked them to take up arms against the outsiders and usher in Satyug (the rule of truth). Soon the leaders were able to mobilise nearly 60,000 Santhals and the revolt spread quickly in the adjoining areas. In popular tribal perception, it was the fight of the 'good' against the 'evil'.



The Santhals cut off postal and rail communications between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal. They proclaimed the end of Company's rule.

Once the government realized the scale of the rebellion, it organised a massive military campaign and the rebellion was suppressed with immense brutality. Violent suppression of the Santhal rebels made them even more aggressive. They declared the end of the Company's rule and declared themselves independent.

Main leaders: **Sidhu** and **Kanhu**

**Suppression:** The heroic struggle of the Santhals against British oppression was brought under control only after extensive military operations in 1856. More than 15,000 Santhals were killed, several villages were destroyed. Sidhu was betrayed, captured and killed while Kanhu was also arrested at the tail end of the rebellion. Afterwards, the government adopted pacific policy towards the Santhals and created a separate district of '**Santhal Parganas**'.



Attack by 600 Santhals upon a party of 50 sepoys

## Revolts in Western India

### Bhil Uprisings (Khandesh; 1818, 1825, 1831 and 1846)

The Bhils were an aboriginal tribe that inhabited the **Western Ghats**, with their stronghold in Khandesh. During 1817–19, the English Company occupied Khandesh, enraging the tribal Bhils who revolted against the intruders. The Company authorities alleged that the Bhils had been instigated against the British by Peshwa Baji Rao II and his minister Trimbakji Danglia and ruthlessly crushed the revolt.

In 1825, the Bhils revolted again under the leadership of **Sewram**. Subsequently the Bhils ravaged the plains in several small groups and clashed with the British forces for several years, signifying the popular character of the discontent, before being finally suppressed.

### Waghera Rising (Okha Mandal, 1818–19)

The Wagheras of Okha Mandal also resented the imposition of Company's rule. The Company also supported the exactions by the Gaekwad of Baroda, forcing the Waghera chiefs to rise in revolt. The Wagheras invaded British territory, culminating in a peace treaty in November 1820.

### The Kutch Rebellion (Kutch and Kathiawar or Saurashtra, 1819 and 1831)

In 1819, the Company's forces defeated the Kutch ruler, Rao Bharmal, in favour of his infant son, while actual administration of Kutch went into the hands of a British Resident. Such administrative innovations as well as steep land revenue assessment by the Company generated much resentment. The Kutch chiefs rose in rebellion and demanded restoration of Bharmal. The disturbances erupted again in 1831, forcing the Company to follow conciliatory policy.

### Ramosi Risings (Western Ghats, 1822)

The Ramosis were also the hill tribes of Western Ghats and resented British invasion. In 1822, the Ramosi tribesmen, led by **Chittur Singh**, revolted against the outsiders and plundered the region around Satara. The area remained disturbed till 1829.

Again in 1839, the British deposed Raja Pratap Singh of Satara, causing widespread resentment. The move triggered a chain of disturbances, compelling the British to use force and restore order.

### Koli Risings (Gujarat; 1824–29, 1839 and 1844–48)

The Kolis lived in the neighbourhood of the Bhils and equally resented the imposition of British rule. The foreigners had destroyed their forts and introduced new order of administration, causing widespread unemployment. They rose in revolt against the outsiders several times between 1824 and 1848.

### Surat Salt Agitation (1844–48)

In 1844, the Company's government raised the salt duty from fifty paise to one rupee, causing great discontent among the people of Surat. Surat, with its long tradition of opposition to unpopular measures, rose in revolt. Anti-British sentiments raged high, and some Europeans were attacked. Seeing the popular nature of the revolt, the government was compelled to roll back the raise in salt duty. In 1848 again, the government's decision to introduce Bengal Standard of Weights and Measures had to be withdrawn owing to popular protest.

### Kolhapur and Savantvadi Revolts (1844)

Maharashtra was in a perpetual state of revolt after the final defeat of the Peshwa. Prominent revolts included Bhil uprisings 1818, Kittur uprising led by Chinnava 1824, the Satara uprising 1841 and the revolt of the Gadkaris 1844.

After 1844, administrative reorganisation in Kolhapur had been carried out, causing widespread dissatisfaction. The **Gadkaris**, a hereditary military class which garrisoned Maratha forts, had been disbanded. Faced with unemployment, the Gadkaris were compelled to rise in revolt. A similar issue caused a revolt in Savantvadi as well.

## Revolts in Southern India

### The Revolt of the Raja of Vizianagaram (1794)

In 1765, the English Company had acquired Northern Circars and adopted an overbearing attitude. Raja's troops were disbanded and an unreasonable demand of ₹3 lakhs was raised. Upon Raja's refusal, his estate was annexed. The Raja retaliated in the form of a revolt with the full support of his people and his troops. Even though the Raja lost his life in a battle in 1794, the Company was compelled to follow a conciliatory policy. It restored the estate to the dead Raja's son and even reduced the demand for money and gifts.



### Revolt of Diwan Velu Thampi (Travancore, 1805)

In 1805, subsidiary alliance was imposed on the ruler of Travancore by Wellesley. Unable to pay the subsidy, the ruler fell in arrears. The high-handed attitude of the British Resident also evoked resentment and Diwan Velu Thampi organised a heroic revolt with the support of Nair battalion. A superior British force later restored peace in the area. Velu Thampi was hanged publicly after death to instil fear among the people.

### The Rebellion at Mysore (1830-31)

After the British victory in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, the British restored Mysore to the Wadiyar ruler and imposed on him a special Treaty of Subsidiary Alliance. The financial demand from the Company forced the Mysore ruler to shift the burden to the zamindars and ultimately to the cultivators. The simmering discontent of the peasants finally broke out in the open in the province of Nagar, one of the four divisions of Mysore. The rebel peasants defied the authority of the Mysore ruler.

Main leader: **Sardar Malla**

**Suppression:** The revolt was finally suppressed by the British forces and the administration of the region finally passed into British hands.

### Mappila (Moplah) Uprisings (Malabar, 1836-54)

The **Muslim cultivators of South Malabar** were popularly known as Mappilas (or Moplahs). They were mainly converts to Islam from the lower caste Hindus, some of them were also the descendants of the Arab settlers in the Malabar Coast. The Moplahs mostly took to agriculture and worked as **jemis or janmi** (bonded labour) of mostly upper caste (Namboodri or Nair) Hindu landlords.

The Moplahs were adversely affected by the British occupation of Malabar in the last decade of the 18th century. Subsequently, Moplah agrarian grievances such as harsh attitude of government officials, high land revenue demand, insecurity of land tenure and landlord exactions compelled the Moplahs to rise in protest against the British and the Hindu landlords.

The religious leaders made significant contribution in mobilising the Moplahs and infusing them with anti-British sentiments. Between 1836 and 1854, there took place more than **22 Mappila uprisings** in Malabar, posing a serious challenge to the British rule. The rebels killed numerous government officials and Hindu landlords.

Since the landlords were mostly upper caste Hindus and the Moplahs were Muslim converts from Hindu lower castes, the uprisings assumed dimensions of a class conflict with religious overtones. Many Moplahs believed that it was a religious virtue to kill oppressive landlords who were also kafirs (non-believers) even at the cost of martyrdom or shahadat.

The British rulers always branded the uprisings as communal outbursts and suppressed the rebels.

Similarly, the **poligars of South India** (Dindigul, Malabar and North Arcot) first began revolting against the Company's land revenue system during the 1790s. The sporadic poligar uprisings continued in Madras Presidency up to 1856.

## Revolts in Northern India

Northern India was no less rebellious and some of the prominent revolts were—Bilaspur revolt (1805), revolt of Aligarh taluqdars (1814-17), rebellions in present-day states of western UP and Haryana (1824) and the revolt of the Jabalpur Bundellas (1842). The Second Punjab War (1848-49) was also in the nature of a popular revolt.

### Kuka or Namdhari Movement (Western Punjab, 1840)

The Namdhari Movement was started in 1840 by **Bhagat Jawahar Mal** (Sian Saheb) and **Baba Balak Singh** in western Punjab. It was popularly called Kuka because its followers resorted to shrieks (kukan) while in ecstasy. It emerged as a powerful instrument of socio-religious reform among the Sikhs under **Baba Ram Singh** who preached worship of one God and attacked social evils like caste system, female infanticide, early marriage and barter of daughters in marriage. He also popularised simple and inexpensive Anand marriages.

However, some of the followers of Baba Ram Singh got out of control and began committing religious excesses. For instance, some fanatics got angry over the killing of cows and murdered the butchers in places like Amritsar and Rajkot. This resulted in clash with the government and several of them were violently repressed. Later, in 1872, Ram Singh was deported to Rangoon.

Though there is difference of opinion among the historians whether the movement was religious or political, violent repression of the Kukas definitely created much hatred against the British rule in the minds of the people in Punjab.

## NATURE OF THE POPULAR UPRISINGS BEFORE 1857

The nature of pre-1857 uprisings is interpreted differently by different historians. The British historians tended to regard them as mere law and order problems and to project the rebels as primitive savages resisting 'civilization', while neglecting the problems faced by peasants and tribals as possible causes. What follows is an attempt to understand the nature of these uprisings.

- **Aim to overthrow immediate oppressors:** The rebels aimed at overthrowing their immediate oppressors—whether it was the oppressive zamindars, money lenders or even the colonial British. For instance, the tribals did not attack all outsiders as enemies. The non-tribal rural poor were not only spared, they even allied with the tribals in their fight against oppression.
- **Keeness to restore the past conditions:** The rebel peasants and the tribals sought to restore the good old past, before the outsiders acquired control and 'bad times fell upon them'. This does not necessarily mean they were backward looking; it merely represents an attempt to regain a 'condition' perceived as ideal by them.
- **Socio-political consciousness:** The peasant and tribal movements of this period also demonstrated a certain level of socio-political consciousness. The rebels' targets were the political sources of their oppression such as the landlords, revenue contractors or



even the British rule itself. They also simultaneously tried to bring about social reform (for instance, the Mappila and the Faraizi leaders simultaneously gave a call for socio-religious reform).

- **Popular character:** Despite British efforts to term these rebellions as criminal actions, they were rather political actions of a popular character. The rebellions drew their legitimacy from the people, allowing public meetings, planning and attack. The tribal uprisings were especially broad based and often involved the entire tribal population of a region.

True, in the early stages the insurgencies were often preceded by acts of crime, ranging from theft to killings emerging from extremely difficult conditions of rural life, yet the crime to rebellion transition has been conveniently neglected by the government of the time. For instance, the Santhal uprising began with a series of dacoities against the moneylenders, later justified by the Santhal leaders as arising from the failure of the government officials to address the genuine grievances of the tribals against the moneylenders.

- **Local leadership:** These movements threw up leaders who themselves belonged to the immediate context of the movements. They were local leaders who had themselves been affected by foreign intrusion, whereas leaders of the national movement were often outsiders who intervened into the peasant and tribal movements as and when necessary.
- **Regional extent:** The extent of the uprisings was limited to the region inhabited by the affected community. For instance, the Santhals fought for their ancestral land which had been grabbed by the outsiders.
- **Drew strength from ethnic ties:** In various degrees, the rebels drew their strength for ethnic ties, religious sentiments and messianic leadership.
- **Unequal nature of war:** The warfare between the rebels and the British forces was grossly unequal. While the peasants and tribals fought with their primitive weapons such as stones, axes, spears, bows and arrows, the British forces were armed with most modern weapons of the time. As a result, the rebels died in lakhs in this unequal war.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE PRE-1857 UPRISINGS

- **Localized and isolated:** Even though the uprisings were continuous and massive in totality, they were isolated from one another and were wholly local in nature. They not only arose out of local grievances, they were also local in extent and effect, which limited their impact on national level.
- **Traditional outlook:** The leaders of these uprisings were backward looking and traditional in outlook, with total disconnect from the modern scientific world. Their basic objective was to re-establish previous forms of socio-political order and offered no modern alternative. The tribal leaders often projected themselves as messengers of God, who had ordered them to take up arms against their oppressors.

- **Failed to achieve their goal of overthrowing the foreign rule:** Such local, disunited, backward looking uprisings were bound to fail in overthrowing the foreign oppressors.

As a result of the above weakness, the uprisings failed to contain British march over Indian land. On the other hand, the British succeeded in containing the rebellions one by one. The less fiery rebel chiefs were given concessions in the form of land reinstatement, reduction in revenue assessment, etc., while the fierier ones were physically wiped out. The ruthless suppression of these uprisings was the major reason why the Revolt of 1857 did not spread to the east, west and south of India.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRE-1857 UPRISINGS

- They were the first expressions of protest against colonial rule.
- The uprisings established a strong tradition of resistance to British rule. Later Indian leaders drew their inspiration from these traditions during the national movement.
- They marked a valuable prelude to the watershed Revolt of 1857

To sum up, in this chapter we saw that the century after 1757 witnessed a large number of popular upsurges and uprisings against the colonial rule and its accompanying evils. The loss of independence, excessive land revenue demands, administrative innovations, foreign intrusion into local autonomy and destruction of village economy were experienced in different regions of India at different points of time, emerging in the form of various peasant and tribal uprisings.

Even though these uprisings suffered from various shortcomings and were finally suppressed in the face of superior British might, they were significant in as much as they were the first expressions of protest against oppression in the colonial period, established a tradition of resistance to the British rule and formed a valuable prelude to the watershed Revolt of 1857.

#### Prelim Capsule

#### Popular Uprisings Upto 1857 Bengal and Eastern India

Revolts	Period	Important Details
<b>Sanyasi-Fakir Rebellion</b>	<b>1763-1800</b>	Causes—Plunder by EIC, famine of 1770. Led by—Musa Shah, Majnu Shah, Bhawani Pathak and Debi Chaudharani. Suppressed by—Warren Hastings. It was made famous by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novel 'Anand Math'.
<b>Chuar Rebellion (Midnapur)</b>	<b>1766-1772, 1795-1816</b>	Causes—Chuar tribesmen rose against famine and increasing land revenue demands.



<b>Peasant Uprising of Rangpur &amp; Dinajpur</b>	<b>1783</b>	Causes—Oppression by the East India Company and its revenue contractors. Led by— <b>Dirjinarain</b> .
<b>Ho and Munda Rising</b>	<b>1820–37</b>	Challenged Company's forces several times in Chota Nagpur & Singhbhum region.
<b>Kol Uprising (Chota Nagpur Plateau)</b>	<b>1820–37</b>	Causes—Kol tribesmen rose against British occupation of Singhbhum & intrusion into the life of the Kols.
<b>Pagal Panthis Revolt</b>	<b>1825</b>	Causes—Oppression of tenants by zamindars. Led by— <b>Tipu Shah</b> .
<b>Ahoms' Revolt (Assam)</b>	<b>1828</b>	Causes—Ahom tribesmen opposed continued occupation of Assam by the British. Led by— <b>Gomdhar Konwar</b> . Consequences—Part of kingdom was restored to the Assamese King.
<b>Khasi Revolt (Khasi Hills)</b>	<b>1829</b>	Causes—Occupation of Khasi Hills by the British. Led by— <b>Tirat Singh</b> .
<b>Faraizi Disturbances</b>	<b>1838–51</b>	Causes—Oppression of peasants by the landlords and the British. Led by— <b>Dudu Mian</b> . In 1857, most of the Faraizis later joined the ranks of the Wahabis.
<b>Khond Uprising (Orissa)</b>	<b>1837–56</b>	Causes—British attempt to put an end to the Khond practice of human sacrifice (mariah). Led by— <b>Chakra Bisoi</b> .
<b>Savara Rebellion</b>	<b>1856–57</b>	Led by— <b>Radhakrishna Dandasena</b> .
<b>Santhal Rebellion (Rajmahal Hills)</b>	<b>1855–56</b>	Causes—The Santhal tribesmen rose against land alienation under Permanent Settlement, excessive rent, usury by moneylenders & intrusion by <b>Dikus</b> . The people of the Santhal tribe inhabited the region between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal, known as ' <b>Daman-i-koh</b> '. It is also known as Santhal ' <b>hool</b> ' or uprising. Led by— <b>Sidhu</b> and <b>Kanhu</b> . Consequence—Government created a separate district of ' <b>Santhal Parganas</b> '

## Western India

Revolts	Period	Important Details
<b>Bhil Uprisings (Khandesh, Western Ghats)</b>	<b>1818, 1825, 1831 and 1846</b>	Causes- British occupation of Khandesh and intrusion by outsiders. Led by - <b>Sewram</b> .
<b>Waghera Rising (Okha Mandal)</b>	<b>1818–19</b>	Causes- imposition of Company's rule & Company's support to exactions by the Gaekwad of Baroda.
<b>The Kutch Rebellion (Kutch and Kathiawar)</b>	<b>1819 &amp; 1831</b>	Causes- Company's forces defeated the Kutch ruler Rao Bharmal in favor of his infant son, while actual administration of Kutch went into the hands of a British Resident. Kutch chiefs rose in rebellion and demanded restoration of Bharmal.
<b>Ramosi Risings (Western Ghats)</b>	<b>1822, 1839</b>	Causes- British invasion into Western Ghats, deposition of Raja Pratap Singh of Satara in 1839. Led by- <b>Chittur Singh</b> .
<b>Koli Risings (Gujarat)</b>	<b>1824–29, 1839 &amp; 1844–48</b>	Causes- Koli tribesmen rose against the imposition of British rule. The British had destroyed their forts and introduced new order of administration, causing widespread unemployment.
<b>Surat Salt Agitation</b>	<b>1844–48</b>	Causes—Salt duty was raised from fifty paise to one rupee by the British government. Consequences- government was compelled to roll back the raise in salt duty.
<b>Kolhapur and Savantvadi Revolts</b>	<b>1844</b>	Causes—Administrative reorganization in Kolhapur and disbanding of the <b>Gadkaris</b> , a hereditary military class which garrisoned Maratha forts.

## Southern India

Revolts	Period	Important Details
<b>The Revolt of the Raja of Vizianagaram</b>	<b>1794</b>	Cause—Annexation of Raja's estate by the British. Consequences—The Company restored the estate to the dead Raja's son and even reduced the demand for money and gifts.



<b>Revolt of Diwan Velu Thampi (Travancore)</b>	<b>1805</b>	Causes—heavy demand for subsidy, high handed attitude of the British Resident. Consequences—Velu Thampi was hanged publicly after death to instill fear among the people.
<b>The Rebellion at Mysore</b>	<b>1830–31</b>	Causes—Peasants rose against heavy revenue demand. Led by— <b>Sardar Malla</b> .
<b>Mappila Uprisings (Malabar)</b>	<b>1836–54</b>	Causes—Moplah peasants rose against agrarian grievances such as harsh attitude of government officials, high land revenue demand, insecurity of land tenure and landlord exactions.

### Northern India

<b>Kuka or Namdhari Movement (Western Punjab)</b>	<b>1840</b>	Led by <b>Bhagat Jawahar Mal</b> and <b>Baba Balak Singh</b> . Later by <b>Baba Ram Singh</b> . In 1872, Ram Singh was deported to Rangoon.
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### Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

- Who among the following was the leader of some anti-British revolts in Sambalpur?  
[UPSC 1994]  
(a) Utirat Singh (b) Surendra Sai  
(c) Kattabomman (d) Syed Ahmad Bareilvi
- Which one of the following mountain tribes did the British first come into contact with after the grant of Diwani in the year 1765?  
[UPSC 2002]  
(a) Garos (b) Khasis  
(c) Kukis (d) Tipperahs
- Which one of the following revolts was made famous by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novel Anand Math?  
[UPSC 2006]  
(a) Bhil uprising  
(b) Rangpur and Dinapur Uprising  
(c) Bishnupur and Birbhum rebellion  
(d) Sannyasi rebellion
- Which of the following provided a common factor for tribal insurrection in India in the 19th century?  
[UPSC 2011]  
(a) Introduction of a new system of land revenue and taxation of tribal products  
(b) Influence of foreign religious missionaries in tribal areas.  
(c) Rise of a large number of money lenders, traders and revenue farmers as middlemen in tribal areas.  
(d) The complete disruption of the old agrarian order of the tribal communities



### Previous Years' Questions – Main Exam

- Discuss the character of major Tribal Uprisings in British India in the 19th century.

[UPSC 1994, 2003]



### Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

- With regard to the pre-1857 uprisings in British India, which of the statements given below is/are incorrect?  
1. The Kolhapur Revolt was led by the Gadkaris.  
2. As a result of the Surat Salt Agitation, the British government was forced to roll back the raise in salt duty.  
3. The Bhil uprisings were spearheaded by the aboriginal Bhil tribesmen of the Eastern Ghats.

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2  
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 3 only

- Examine the following statements with regard to the Santhal Rebellion-

- The Santhal tribe originally inhabited a region known as 'Santahl Parganas'.
- Subsequent to the Santhal rebellion, the government adopted pacific policy and created a separate district for the Santhals known as 'Daman-i-Koh'.

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only  
(c) both (d) neither

- Arrange the following uprisings in correct chronological order-

- Chuar rebellion
- Faraizi rebellion
- Santhal rebellion

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1-3-2 (b) 2-1-3  
(c) 3-2-1 (d) 1-2-3

- Which of the following pairs is/are correctly matched?

- Kol uprising- Chota Nagpur Plateau
- Faraizi disturbances- western Bengal
- Kandh uprising- Kalahandi

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3  
(c) 1 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

- Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding the Santhal rebellion?

- The uprising was locally known as 'ulgulaan'.
- The uprising was led by Karam Shah and Tipu Shah.

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only  
(c) both (d) neither

- Which of the following pairs is/are correctly matched?

- Faraizi Uprising- Musa Shah
- Pagal Panthi Revolt- Tipu Shah
- Khasi Revolt- Tirat Singh

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3  
(c) 3 only (d) 1, 2 and 3

- Which of the following was/were among the factors responsible for pre-1857 tribal uprisings in India?



#### 4.20 Modern Indian History

1. The colonial administration encouraged tribal isolation, which continues even today in some parts of the country.
2. The British recognized the tribals as zamindars and introduced new land revenue system.

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 only                      (b) 2 only  
(c) both                      (d) neither
8. Of the given options, which one most appropriately describes the term 'dikus'?
- (a) tribal dacoits  
(b) local zamindars  
(c) impoverished peasants  
(d) outsiders in tribal areas
9. Which of the following is incorrectly matched?
1. Peasant uprising of Rangpur- Dirjina-rain
  2. Ahom revolt- Gomdhar Konwar
  3. Kandh Uprising- Chakra Bisoi

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 only  
(b) 1 and 2  
(c) 3 only  
(d) none of the above
10. Examine the following statements with reference to the tribal uprisings during the early colonial period in India-
1. The tribals attacked all outsiders, whether European or Indian.
  2. Using their bows and arrows, the tribals fought an equal war with the British forces.
  3. The tribals often drew their strength from ethnic ties and messianic leadership.

Which of the above statements is/are true?

Select the correct answer from the following options:

- (a) 1 and 2                      (b) 1 and 3  
(c) 1, 2 and 3                      (d) 3 only



### Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. Discuss the various factors that were responsible for the uprisings that took place in India in the pre-1857 period.
2. Write a Short Note on each of the following:  
(a) Sanyasi Rebellion  
(b) Santhal Rebellion
3. 'The colonial administration changed the relationship of the tribals with their land and forests'. Discuss the statement in the context of tribal uprisings in the pre-1857 era.
4. Despite their limitations, the pre-1857 peasant and tribal uprisings were significant in many ways. Evaluate.
5. Discuss the nature of popular uprisings in India before 1857.

### Answers

#### Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (b)                      2. (b)                      3. (d)                      4. (c)

#### Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (d)                      2. (d)                      3. (d)                      4. (c)                      5. (d)  
6. (b)                      7. (b)                      8. (d)                      9. (d)                      10. (d)