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The Revolt of 1857

Simmering Discontent

In 1757, after the Battle of Plassey, the British laid the first step towards getting power in northern India. And in 1857 took place the major 'Revolt' which was a product of the character and policies of colonial rule after 1757, and after which noteworthy changes took place in the British policy of ruling over India. The cumulative effect of British expansionist policies, economic exploitation and administrative innovations over the years had adversely affected the positions of all—rulers of Indian states, sepoys, zamindars, peasants, traders, artisans, pundits, maulvis, etc. The simmering discontent burst in the form of a violent storm in 1857 which shook the British empire in India to its very foundations.

However, the period between 1757 and 1857 was not all peaceful and trouble-free; it saw a series of sporadic popular outbursts in the form of religio-political violence, tribal movements, peasant uprisings and agrarian riots, and civil rebellions. Enhanced revenue demands—even in famine years—caused anger. Many a times, movements against local moneylenders turned into rebellion against the Company rule as the moneylenders had the support of the police. British interference in native religious/traditional customs also caused resentment and resulted in rebellions. Almost from the very early days of the East India Company's rule, rebellions and

uprisings occurred for various causes in different regions. Some of the movements continued even after the 1857 Revolt. Major revolts took place in the south, east, west and the north-eastern regions which were suppressed with brutality by the Company.

[The previous chapter discussed some of these uprisings.]

The 1857 Revolt: the Major Causes

The causes of the revolt of 1857, like those of earlier uprisings, emerged from all aspects—socio-cultural, economic and political—of daily existence of Indian population cutting through all sections and classes. These causes are discussed below.

■ Economic Causes

The colonial policies of the East India Company destroyed the traditional economic fabric of the Indian society. The peasantry were never really to recover from the disabilities imposed by the new and a highly unpopular revenue settlement. Impoverished by heavy taxation, the peasants resorted to loans from money-lenders/traders at usurious rates, the latter often evicting the former from their land on non-payment of debt dues. These money-lenders and traders emerged as the new landlords, while the scourge of landless peasantry and rural indebtedness has continued to plague Indian society to this day. The older system of zamindari was forced to disintegrate.

British rule also meant misery to the artisans and handicrafts people. The annexation of Indian states by the Company cut off their major source of patronage—the native rulers and the nobles, who could not now afford to be patrons of the crafts workers. Added to this, British policy discouraged Indian handicrafts and promoted British goods. The highly skilled Indian craftsmen were forced to look for alternate sources of employment that hardly existed, as the destruction

View

It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning-wheel. England began with depriving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons."

—Karl Marx, in 1853

of Indian handicrafts was not accompanied by the development of modern industries.

The Indian trade and mercantile class was deliberately crippled by the British who imposed high tariff duties on Indian-made goods. At the same time, the import of British goods into India attracted low tariffs, thus encouraging their entry into India. By mid-nineteenth century, exports of cotton and silk textiles from India practically came to an end. Free trade—one way, that is—and refusal to impose protective duties against machine-made goods from Britain simply killed Indian manufacture.

Zamindars, the traditional landed aristocracy, often saw their land rights forfeited with frequent use of a *quo warranto* by the administration. This resulted in a loss of status for them in the villages. In Awadh, the storm centre of the revolt, 21,000 taluqdars had their estates confiscated and suddenly found themselves without a source of income, "unable to work, ashamed to beg, condemned to penury". These dispossessed taluqdars seized the opportunity presented by the sepoy revolt to oppose the British and try to regain what they had lost.

The ruin of Indian industry increased the pressure on agriculture and land, which could not support all the people; the lopsided development resulted in pauperisation of the country in general.

■ Political Causes

The East India Company's greedy policy of aggrandisement accompanied by broken pledges and promises resulted in

contempt for the Company and loss of political prestige, besides causing suspicion in the minds of almost all the ruling princes in India, through such policies as of 'Effective Control', 'Subsidiary Alliance' and 'Doctrine of Lapse'. The right of succession was denied to Hindu princes. The Mughals were humbled when, on Prince Faqiruddin's death in 1856, whose succession had been recognised conditionally by Lord Dalhousie, Lord Canning announced that the next prince on succession would have to renounce the regal title and the ancestral Mughal palaces, in addition to the renunciations agreed upon by Prince Faqiruddin.

The collapse of rulers—the erstwhile aristocracy—also adversely affected those sections of the Indian society which derived their sustenance from cultural and religious pursuits.

■ **Administrative Causes**

Rampant corruption in the Company's administration, especially among the police, petty officials and lower law courts, was a major cause of discontent. Indeed, it is the view of many historians that the rampant corruption we see now in India is a legacy of the Company rule. Also, the character of British rule imparted a foreign and alien look to it in the eyes of Indians: a kind of absentee sovereignty.

■ **Socio-Religious Causes**

Racial overtones and a superiority complex characterised the British administrative attitude towards the native Indian population. The activities of Christian missionaries who followed the British flag in India were looked upon with suspicion by Indians. The attempts at socio-religious reform such as abolition of sati, support to widow-marriage and women's education were seen by a large section of the population as interference in the social and religious domains of Indian society by outsiders. These fears were compounded by the government's decision to tax mosque and temple lands and making laws such as the Religious Disabilities Act, 1856, which modified Hindu customs, for instance, declaring that

a change of religion did not debar a son from inheriting the property of his 'heathen' father.

■ Influence of Outside Events

The revolt of 1857 coincided with certain outside events in which the British suffered serious losses—the First Afghan War (1838-42), Punjab Wars (1845-49), and the Crimean Wars (1854-56). These had obvious psychological repercussions. The British were seen to be not so strong and it was felt that they could be defeated.

■ Discontent Among Sepoys

The conditions of service in the Company's Army and cantonments increasingly came into conflict with the religious beliefs and prejudices of the sepoys. Restrictions on wearing caste and sectarian marks and secret rumours of proselytising activities of the chaplains (often maintained on the Company's expenses which meant at Indian expense) were interpreted by Indian sepoys, who were generally conservative by nature, as interference in their religious affairs.

To the religious Hindu of the time, crossing the seas meant loss of caste. In 1856, Lord Canning's government passed the General Service Enlistment Act which decreed that all future recruits to the Bengal Army would have to give an undertaking to serve anywhere their services might be required by the government. This caused resentment.

The Indian sepoy was equally unhappy with his emoluments compared to his British counterpart. A more immediate cause of the sepoys' dissatisfaction was the order that they would not be given the foreign service allowance (*bhatta*) when serving in Sindh or in Punjab. The annexation of Awadh, home of many of the sepoys, further inflamed their feelings.

The Indian sepoy was made to feel a subordinate at every step and was discriminated against racially and in matters of promotion and privileges. The discontent of the sepoys was not limited to military matters; it reflected the general disenchantment with and the opposition to British

rule. The sepoy, in fact, was a 'peasant in uniform' whose consciousness was not divorced from that of the rural population. "The Army voiced grievances other than its own; and the movement spread beyond the Army", observes S. Gopal.

Finally, there had been a long history of revolts in the British Indian Army—in Bengal (1764), Vellore (1806), Barrackpore (1825) and during the Afghan Wars (1838-42) to mention just a few.

Beginning and Spread of the Revolt

■ **The Spark**

The reports about the mixing of bone dust in *atta* (flour) and the introduction of the Enfield rifle enhanced the sepoys' growing disaffection with the government. The greased wrapping paper of the cartridge of the new rifle had to be bitten off before loading and the grease was reportedly made of beef and pig fat. The cow was sacred to the Hindus while the pig was taboo for the Muslims. The Army administration did nothing to allay these fears, and the sepoys felt their religion was in grave danger.

The greased cartridges did not create a new cause of discontent in the Army, but supplied the occasion for the simmering discontent to come out in the open.

■ **Starts at Meerut**

The revolt began at Meerut, 58 km from Delhi, on May 10, 1857 and then, gathering force rapidly, 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 Meerut incident, there were rumblings of resentment in various cantonments. The 19th Native Infantry at Berhampur, which refused to use the newly introduced Enfield rifle and broke out in mutiny in February 1857 was disbanded in March 1857. A young sepoy of the

34th Native Infantry, **Mangal Pande**, went a step further and fired at the sergeant major of his unit at Barrackpore. He was overpowered and executed on April 8 while his regiment was disbanded in May. The 7th Awadh Regiment which defied its officers on May 3 met with a similar fate.

And then came the explosion at Meerut. On April 24, ninety men of the 3rd Native Cavalry refused to accept the greased cartridges. On May 9, eighty-five of them were dismissed, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and put in fetters. This sparked off a general mutiny among the Indian soldiers stationed at Meerut. The very next day, on May 10, they released their imprisoned comrades, killed their officers and unfurled the banner of revolt. They set off for Delhi after sunset.

■ **Choice of Bahadur Shah as Symbolic Head**

In Delhi, the local infantry joined them, killed their own European officers including Simon Fraser, the political agent, and seized the city. Lieutenant Willoughby, the officer-in-charge of the magazine at Delhi, offered some resistance, but was overcome. The aged and powerless Bahadur Shah Zafar was proclaimed the Emperor of India.

Delhi was soon to become the centre of the Great Revolt and Bahadur Shah, its symbol. This spontaneous raising of the last Mughal king to the leadership of the country was a recognition of the fact that the long reign of Mughal dynasty had become the traditional symbol of India's political unity. With this single act, the sepoys had transformed a mutiny of soldiers into a revolutionary war, while all Indian chiefs who took part in the revolt hastened to proclaim their loyalty to the Mughal emperor. It also signified that the rebels were politically motivated. Though religion was a factor, the broad outlook of the rebels was not influenced by religious identity but by the perception of the British as the common enemy.

Bahadur Shah, after initial vacillation, wrote letters to all the chiefs and rulers of India urging them to organise 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, Bundelkhand, central India, large parts of Bihar and East Punjab shook off British authority.

■ Civilians Join

The revolt of the sepoys was accompanied by a rebellion of the civil population, particularly in the north-western provinces and Awadh. Their accumulated grievances found immediate expression and they rose *en masse* to give vent to their opposition to British rule. It is the widespread participation in the revolt by the peasantry, the artisans, shopkeepers, day labourers, zamindars, religious mendicants, priests and civil servants which gave it real strength as well as the character of a popular revolt. Here the peasants and petty zamindars gave free expression to their grievances by attacking the money-lenders and zamindars who had displaced them from the land. They took advantage of the revolt to destroy the money-lenders' account books and debt records. They also attacked the British-established law courts, revenue offices (*tehsils*), revenue records and police stations.

According to one estimate, of the total number of about 1,50,000 men who died fighting the English in Awadh, over 1,00,000 were civilians.

Within a month of the capture of Delhi by the rebels, the revolt spread to different parts of the country.

■ Storm Centres and Leaders of the Revolt

At Delhi the nominal and symbolic leadership belonged to the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, but the real command lay with a court of soldiers headed by **General Bakht Khan** who had led the revolt of Bareilly troops and brought them

to Delhi. The court consisted of ten members, six from the army and four from the civilian departments. The court conducted the affairs of the state in the name of the emperor. Emperor **Bahadur Shah** was perhaps the weakest link in the chain of leadership of the revolt. His weak personality, old age and lack of leadership qualities created political weakness at the nerve centre of the revolt and did incalculable damage to it.

At Kanpur, the natural choice was **Nana Saheb**, the adopted son of the last peshwa, Baji Rao II. He was refused the family title and banished from Poona, and was living near Kanpur. Nana Saheb expelled the English from Kanpur, proclaimed himself the peshwa, acknowledged Bahadur Shah as the Emperor of India and declared himself to be his governor. Sir Hugh Wheeler, commanding the station, surrendered on June 27, 1857 and was killed on the same day.

Begum Hazrat Mahal took over the reigns at Lucknow where the rebellion broke out on June 4, 1857 and popular sympathy was overwhelmingly in favour of the deposed nawab. Her son, Birjis Qadir, was proclaimed the nawab and a regular administration was organised with important offices shared equally by Muslims and Hindus. Henry Lawrence, the British resident, the European inhabitants and a few hundred loyal sepoys took shelter in the residency. The residency was besieged by the Indian rebels and Sir Henry was killed during the siege. The command of the besieged garrison devolved on Brigadier Inglis who held out against heavy odds. The early attempts of Sir Henry Havelock and Sir James Outram to recover Lucknow met with no success. Finally, Sir Colin Campbell, the new commander-in-chief, evacuated the Europeans with the help of Gorkha regiments. In March 1858, the city was finally recovered by the British, but guerrilla activity continued till September of the same year.

At Bareilly, **Khan Bahadur**, a descendant of the former ruler of Rohilkhand, was placed in command. Not enthusiastic about the pension being granted by the British, he organised an army of 40,000 soldiers and offered stiff resistance to the British.

In Bihar, the revolt was led by **Kunwar Singh**, the zamindar of Jagdishpur. An old man in his seventies, he nursed a grudge against the British who had deprived him of his estates. He unhesitatingly joined the sepoy when they reached Arrah from Dinapore (Danapur).

Maulvi Ahmadullah of Faizabad was another outstanding leader of the revolt. He was a native of Madras and had moved to Faizabad in the north where he fought a stiff battle against the British troops. He emerged as one of the revolt's acknowledged leaders once it broke out in Awadh in May 1857.

The most outstanding leader of the revolt was **Rani Laxmibai**, who assumed the leadership of the sepoy at Jhansi. Lord Dalhousie, the governor-general, had refused to allow her adopted son to succeed to the throne after her husband Raja Gangadhar Rao died, and had annexed the state by the application of the infamous 'Doctrine of Lapse'. Driven out of Jhansi by British forces, she gave the battle cry—"main apni Jhansi nahin doongi" (I shall not give away my Jhansi). She was joined by **Tantia Tope**, a close associate of Nana Saheb, after the loss of Kanpur. The Rani of Jhansi and Tantia Tope marched towards Gwalior where they were hailed by the Indian soldiers. The Sindhia, the local

View

Here lay the woman who was the only man among the rebels.

—Hugh Rose

(a tribute to the Rani of Jhansi from the man who defeated her)

ruler, however, decided to side with the English and took shelter at Agra. Nana Saheb was proclaimed the Peshwa and plans were chalked out for a march into the south. Gwalior was recaptured by the English in June 1858.

The sacrifices made by the common masses were immense and innumerable. The name of **Shah Mal**, a local villager in Pargana Baraut (Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh), is most notable. He organised the headmen and peasants of 84 villages (referred as *chaurasi desh*), marching at night from village to village, urging people to rebel against the British hegemony. The people attacked government buildings, destroyed the bridges over the rivers and dug up metalled roads—partially to stop government forces from coming into the area, and partly because bridges and roads were viewed as symbols of British rule. Shah Mal sent supplies to the mutineers in Delhi and prevented all official communication between British headquarters and Meerut. He made his headquarters at the bungalow of an irrigation department on the banks of the Yamuna and supervised and controlled his operations from there. In fact, the bungalow was turned into a “hall of justice”, resolving disputes and dispensing judgments. He also organised an effective network of intelligence for a short duration, the people of the area felt that the British rule was over, and their own rule had come. Unfortunately, in July 1857, Shah Mal was killed by an English officer, Dunlap. It is alleged that Shah Mal’s body was cut into pieces and his head displayed on July 21, 1857 to terrify the public. For more than a year, however, the rebels carried on their struggle against heavy odds.

Suppression of the Revolt

The revolt was finally suppressed. The British captured Delhi on September 20, 1857 after prolonged and bitter fighting. John Nicholson, the leader of the siege, was badly wounded

and later succumbed to his injuries. Bahadur Shah was taken prisoner. The royal princes were captured and butchered on the spot, publicly shot at point blank range by Lieutenant Hudson himself. The emperor was exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862. Thus the great House of Mughals was finally and completely extinguished. Terrible vengeance was wreaked on the inhabitants of Delhi. With the fall of Delhi the focal point of the revolt disappeared.

One by one, all the great leaders of the revolt fell. Military operations for the recapture of Kanpur were closely associated with the recovery of Lucknow. Sir Colin Campbell occupied Kanpur on December 6, 1857. Nana Saheb, defeated at Kanpur, escaped to Nepal in early 1859, never to be heard of again. His close associate Tantia Tope escaped into the jungles of central India, but was captured while asleep in April 1859 and put to death. The Rani of Jhansi had died on the battlefield earlier in June 1858. Jhansi was recaptured by Sir Hugh Rose. By 1859, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Rao Sahib (brother of Nana Saheb) and Maulvi Ahmadullah were all dead, while the Begum of Awadh was compelled to hide in Nepal. At Benaras, a rebellion had been organised which was mercilessly suppressed by Colonel Neill, who put to death all suspected rebels and even disorderly sepoys.

By the end of 1859, British authority over India was fully re-established. The British government had to pour immense supplies of men, money and arms into the country, though the Indians had to later repay the entire cost through their own suppression.

Why the Revolt Failed

■ All-India participation was absent

Limited territorial spread was one factor; there was no all-India veneer about the revolt. The eastern, southern and

western parts of India remained more or less unaffected. This was probably because the earlier uprisings in those regions had been brutally suppressed by the Company.

■ All classes did not join

Certain classes and groups did not join and, in fact, worked against the revolt.

Big zamindars acted as “break-waters to storm”; even Awadh taluqdars backed off once promises of land restitution were spelt out. Money-lenders and merchants suffered the wrath of the mutineers badly and anyway saw their class interests better protected under British patronage.

Educated Indians viewed this revolt as backward looking, supportive of the feudal order and as a reaction of traditional conservative forces to modernity; these people had high hopes that the British would usher in an era of modernisation.

Most Indian rulers refused to join, and often gave active help to the British. Rulers who did not participate included the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkar of Indore, the rulers of Patiala, Sindh and other Sikh chieftains and the Maharaja of Kashmir. Indeed, by one estimate, not more than one-fourth of the total area and not more than one-tenth of the total population was affected.

■ Poor Arms and Equipment

The Indian soldiers were poorly equipped materially, fighting generally with swords and spears and very few guns and muskets. On the other hand, the European soldiers were equipped with the latest weapons of war like the Enfield rifle. The electric telegraph kept the commander-in-chief informed about the movements and strategy of the rebels.

■ Uncoordinated and Poorly Organised

The revolt was poorly organised with no coordination or central leadership. The principal rebel leaders—Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, Kunwar Singh, Laxmibai—were no match to their British opponents in generalship. On the other hand, the

East India Company was fortunate in having the services of men of exceptional abilities in the Lawrence brothers, John Nicholson, James Outram, Henry Havelock, etc.

■ No Unified Ideology

The mutineers lacked a clear understanding of colonial rule; nor did they have a forward looking programme, a coherent ideology, a political perspective or a societal alternative. The rebels represented diverse elements with differing grievances and concepts of current politics.

The lack of unity among Indians was perhaps unavoidable at this stage of Indian history. Modern nationalism was as yet unknown in India. In fact, the revolt of 1857 played an important role in bringing the Indian people together and imparting to them the consciousness of belonging to one country.

Hindu-Muslim Unity Factor

During the entire revolt, there was complete cooperation between Hindus and Muslims at all levels—people, soldiers, leaders. All rebels acknowledged Bahadur Shah Zafar, a Muslim, as the emperor and the first impulse of the Hindu sepoys at Meerut was to march to Delhi, the Mughal imperial capital. According to Maulana Azad, “Two facts stand out clearly in the midst of the tangled story of the Rising of 1857. The first is the remarkable sense of unity among the Hindus and the Muslims of India in this period. The other is the deep loyalty which the people felt for the Mughal Crown.” Rebels and sepoys, both Hindu and Muslim, respected each other’s sentiments. Immediate banning of cow slaughter was ordered once the revolt was successful in a particular area. Both Hindus and Muslims were well represented in leadership, for instance Nana Saheb had Azimullah, a Muslim and an expert in political propaganda, as an aide, while Laxmibai had the solid support of Afghan soldiers.

Thus, the events of 1857 demonstrated that the people and politics of India were not basically communal or sectarian before 1858.

Nature of the Revolt

Views differ on the nature of the 1857 revolt. It was a mere ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ to some British historians—“a wholly unpatriotic and selfish Sepoy Mutiny with no native leadership and no popular support”, said Sir John Seeley. However, that is not a complete picture of the event as it involved many sections of the civilian population and not just the sepoys. The discontent of the sepoys was just one cause of the disturbance.

Dr K. Datta considers the revolt of 1857 to have been “in the main a military outbreak, which was taken advantage of by certain discontented princes and landlords, whose interests had been affected by the new political order”. The last mentioned factor gave it an aura of a popular uprising in certain areas. It was “never all-Indian in character, but was localised, restricted and poorly organised”. Further, says Datta, the movement was marked by absence of cohesion and unity of purpose among the various sections of the rebels.

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the 1857 revolt came to be interpreted as a “planned war of national independence”, by V.D. Savarkar in his book, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*. Savarkar called the revolt the first war of Indian independence. He said it was inspired by the lofty ideal of self rule by Indians through a nationalist upsurge. Dr S.N. Sen in his *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* considers the revolt as having begun as a fight for religion but ending as a war of independence.

Dr R.C. Majumdar, however, considers it as neither the first, nor national, nor a war of independence as large parts of the country remained unaffected and many sections of the people took no part in the upsurge.

Views

1857 stands firmly in a historical continuum. Not of course it was the direct product of social forces blowing off the political crust but rather fortuitous conjuncture that laid these forces bane. Like 1848 in Europe—despite obvious disparities—it was an uprising sans issue that could catch a society moving into the early stages of modernisation.

Eric Stokes

First War of Independence it certainly was, as in the whole canvas of the recorded history of India it would be difficult to find a parallel to this gigantic anti-foreign combine of all classes of people and of many provinces of India. There was never a war in India lasting continuously for more than a year and simultaneously in all the regions which had for its objective the abasement and ejection of the alien ruling power.

S.B. Chaudhuri

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the so-called First National War of Independence of 1857 is neither First, nor National, nor War of Independence.

R.C. Majumdar

It has to be admitted that the war against the British was not inspired by any sentiment of nationalism, for in 1857 India was not yet politically a nation. It is a fact that the Hindus and Muslims cooperated, but the leaders and the followers of the two communities were moved by personal loyalties rather than loyalty to a common motherland.

Tara Chand

According to some Marxist historians, the 1857 revolt was “the struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign as well as feudal bondage”. However, this view can be questioned in the light of the fact that the leaders of the revolt themselves came from a feudal background.

Jawaharlal Nehru considered the Revolt of 1857 as essentially a feudal uprising though there were some nationalistic elements in it (*Discovery of India*). M.N. Roy felt the Revolt was a last ditch stand of feudalism against commercial capitalism. R.P. Dutt also saw the significance

of the Revolt of the peasantry against foreign domination even as he acknowledged it to be a defence of the old feudal order.

The revolt of 1857 is not easy to categorise. While one can easily dismiss some views such as those of L.E.R. Rees who considered it to be a war of fanatic religionists against Christians or T.R. Holmes who saw in it a conflict between civilisation and barbarism, one cannot quite go so far as to accept it as a war for independence. It had seeds of nationalism and anti-imperialism but the concept of common nationality and nationhood was not inherent to the revolt of 1857.

It is doubtful if the separate communities that participated in the revolt did so because they felt a common nationhood. Furthermore, what of the southern section which

Views

The passions of the mutineers were centred on their grievances, not on larger ideals.

Percival Spear

The Mutiny became a Revolt and assumed a political character when the mutineers of Meerut placed themselves under the king of Delhi and a section of the landed aristocracy and civil population decided in his favour. What began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence.

S.N. Sen

... had a single leader of ability arisen among them (the rebels), we must have been lost beyond redemption.

John Lawrence

The revolt of 1857 was a struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign imperialism as well as indigenous landlordism.

Marxist Interpretation

It was far more than a mutiny, ... yet much less than a first war of independence.

Stanley Wolpert

was not a part of the revolt? Each of the leaders had a personal cause for revolting; each had a personal interest to protect. However, as Dr Sen points out, national revolutions are mostly the work of a minority, with or without the active support of the masses. From that point of view, the 1857 Rebellion can claim a national character.

One may say that the revolt of 1857 was the first great struggle of Indians to throw off British rule. Even this view has been questioned by some historians who feel that some of the earlier uprisings had been equally serious efforts at throwing off the foreign yoke, but have not got the same kind of attention. However, S.B. Chaudhuri observes, the revolt was “the first combined attempt of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power. This is a real, if remote, approach to the freedom movement of India of a later age”.

Consequences

The revolt of 1857 marks a turning point in the history of India. It led to far-reaching changes in the system of administration and the policies of the British government.

Even before the Revolt could be suppressed fully, the British Parliament, on August 2, 1858, passed an Act for the Better Government of India. The Act declared Queen Victoria as the sovereign of British India and provided for the appointment of a Secretary of State for India (a member of the British cabinet). The direct responsibility for the administration of the country was assumed by the British Crown and Company rule was abolished.

The assumption of the Government of India by the sovereign of Great Britain was announced by Lord Canning at a durbar at Allahabad in the ‘Queen’s Proclamation’ issued on November 1, 1858. (It was by this proclamation that the governor-general acquired the additional title of ‘Viceroy’.) Many of the promises made in that proclamation appeared to be of a positive nature to the Indians.

As per the Queen's proclamation, the era of annexations and expansion had ended and the British promised to respect the dignity and rights of the native princes.

The Indian states were henceforth to recognise the paramountcy of the British Crown and were to be treated as parts of a single charge.

The people of India were promised freedom of religion without interference from British officials.

The proclamation also promised equal and impartial protection under law to all Indians, besides equal opportunities in government services irrespective of race or creed. It was also promised that old Indian rights, customs and practices would be given due regard while framing and administering the law.

The Army, which was at the forefront of the outbreak, was thoroughly reorganised and British military policy came to be dominated by the idea of "division and counterpoise". The British could no longer depend on Indian loyalty, so the number of Indian soldiers was drastically reduced even as the number of European soldiers was increased. The concept of divide and rule was adopted with separate units being created on the basis of caste/community/region. Recruits were to be drawn from the 'martial' races of Punjab, Nepal, and north-western frontier who had proved loyal to the British during the Revolt. Effort was made to keep the army away from civilian population.

The Army Amalgamation Scheme, 1861 moved the Company's European troops to the services of the Crown. Further, the European troops in India were constantly revamped by periodical visits to England, sometimes termed as the 'linked-battalion' scheme. All Indian artillery units, except a few mountain batteries, were made defunct. All higher posts in the army and the artillery departments were reserved for the Europeans. Till the first decade of the twentieth century,

White Mutiny

In the wake of the transfer of power from the British East India Company to the British Crown, a section of European forces employed under the Company resented the move that required the three Presidency Armies to transfer their allegiance from the defunct Company to the Queen, as in the British Army. This resentment resulted in some unrest termed as White Mutiny.

Prior to 1861, there were two separate military forces in India, operating under the British rule. One was the Queen's army and the other comprised the units of the East India Company. The Company's troops received *batta*, extra allowances of pay to cover various expenditures related to operations in areas other than the home territories. With transfer of power, the *batta* was stopped. Lord Canning's legalistic interpretation of the laws surrounding the transfer also infuriated the affected White soldiers.

The White Mutiny was seen as a potential threat to the already precarious British position in India with a potential of inciting renewed rebellion among the 'still excited population in India'. The demands of the 'European Forces' included an enlistment bonus or a choice of release from their obligations. Finally, the demand for free and clear release with free passage home was accepted, and men opted to return home. It is also believed that open rebellion and physical violence on the part of 'European Forces' were such that there was little possibility of being accepted into the 'Queen's Army'.

no Indian was thought fit to deserve the king's commission and a new English recruit was considered superior to an Indian officer holding the viceroy's commission.

The earlier reformist zeal of a self-confident Victorian liberalism evaporated as many liberals in Britain began to believe that Indians were beyond reform. This new approach—'conservative brand of liberalism', as it was called by Thomas Metcalf—had the solid support of the conservative and aristocratic classes of England who espoused the complete non-interference in the traditional structure of Indian society. Thus the era of reforms came to an end.

The conservative reaction in England made the British

View

In conceptual terms, the British who had started their rule as 'outsiders', became 'insiders' by vesting in their monarch the sovereignty of India.

Bernard Cohn (*in context of the Queen's Proclamation*)

Empire in India more autocratic; it began to deny the aspirations of the educated Indians for sharing power. In the long term, this new British attitude proved counter-productive for the Empire, as this caused frustrations in the educated Indian middle classes and gave rise to modern nationalism very soon.

The policy of divide and rule started in earnest after the Revolt of 1857. The British used one class/community against another unscrupulously. Thus, socially, there was irremediable deterioration. While British territorial conquest was at an end, a period of systematic economic loot by the British began. The Indian economy was fully exploited without fear.

In accordance with Queen's Proclamation of 1858, the Indian Civil Service Act of 1861 was passed, which was to give an impression that under the Queen all were equal, irrespective of race or creed. (In reality, the detailed rules framed for the conduct of the civil service examination had the effect of keeping the higher services a close preserve of the colonisers.)

Racial hatred and suspicion between the Indians and the English was probably the worst legacy of the revolt. The newspapers and journals in Britain pictured the Indians as subhuman creatures, who could be kept in check only by superior force. The proponents of imperialism in India dubbed the entire Indian population as unworthy of trust and

subjected them to insults and contempt. The complete structure of the Indian government was remodelled and based on the notion of a master race—justifying the philosophy of the ‘Whiteman’s burden’. This widened the gulf between the rulers and the ruled, besides causing eruptions of political controversies, demonstrations and acts of violence in the coming period.

Significance of the Revolt

For the British the Revolt of 1857 proved useful in that it showed up the glaring shortcomings in the Company’s administration and its army, which they rectified promptly. These defects would never have been revealed to the world if the Revolt had not happened.

For the Indians, the 1857 Revolt had a major influence on the course of the struggle for freedom. It brought out in the open grievances of people and the sepoys, which were seen to be genuine. However, it was also obvious that the primitive arms which the Indians possessed were no match for the advanced weapons of the British. Furthermore, the senseless atrocities committed by both sides shocked the Indian intellectuals who were increasingly convinced that violence was to be eschewed in any struggle for freedom. The educated middle class, which was a growing section, did not believe in violence and preferred an orderly approach. But the Revolt of 1857 did establish local traditions of resistance to British rule which were to be of help in the course of the national struggle for freedom.

Summary

Revolt—a product of character and policies of colonial rule.

Economic causes—heavy taxation under new revenue settlement, summary evictions, discriminatory tariff policy against Indian products, destruction of traditional handicrafts industry, and absence of concomitant industrialisation on modern lines that hit peasants, artisans and small zamindars.

Political causes—greedy policy of aggrandisement, absentee sovereignty character of British rule, British interference in socio-religious affairs of Indian public.

Military causes—discontent among sepoys for economic, psychological and religious reasons, coupled with a long history of revolts.

● Centres of Revolt and Leaders

Delhi	- General Bakht Khan
Kanpur	- Nana Saheb
Lucknow	- Begum Hazrat Mahal
Bareilly	- Khan Bahadur
Bihar	- Kunwar Singh
Faizabad	- Maulvi Ahmadullah
Jhansi	- Rani Laxmibai
Baghpat	- Shah Mal

● The British Resistance

Delhi	- Lieutenant Willoughby, John Nicholson, Lieutenant Hudson
Kanpur	- Sir Hugh Wheeler, Sir Colin Campbell
Lucknow	- Henry Lawrence, Brigadier Inglis, Henry Havelock, James Outram, Sir Colin Campbell
Jhansi	- Sir Hugh Rose
Benaras	- Colonel James Neill

● Causes of Failure

Limited territorial and social base.

Crucial support of certain sections of Indian public to British authorities.

Lack of resources as compared to those of the British.

Lack of coordination and a central leadership.
Lack of a coherent ideology and a political perspective.

- **Nature**

R.C. Majumdar and S.N. Sen—“Not an organised ‘national’ revolt”
R.C. Majumdar—“Neither first, nor National War of Independence”
V.D. Savarkar—“War of independence”
Eric Stokes—“Elitist in character”
Lawrence and Seeley—“Mere sepoy mutiny”
T.R. Holmes—“A conflict between civilisation and barbarism”
James Outram—“A Mohammedan conspiracy making capital of Hindu grievances”

Percival Spear—Three phases of the revolt

Conclusion: Not quite the first war of independence but sowed the seeds of nationalism and quest for freedom from alien rule.

- **Effect**

Crown took over; Company rule abolished. Queen’s Proclamation altered administration. Army reorganised. Racial hatred deepened. White Mutiny.