

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Revolt of 1857*

**A** MIGHTY popular Revolt broke out in Northern and Central India in 1857 and nearly swept away British rule. It began with a mutiny of the sepoys, or the Indian soldiers of the Company's army, but soon engulfed wide regions and people. Millions of peasants, artisans, and soldiers fought heroically for over a year and by their courage and sacrifice wrote a glorious chapter in the history of the Indian people.

The Revolt of 1857 was much more than a mere product of sepoy discontent. It was in reality a product of the accumulated grievances of the people against the Company's administration and of their dislike for the foreign regime. For over a century, as the British had been conquering the country bit by bit, popular discontent and hatred against foreign rule had been gaining strength among the different sections of Indian society. It was this discontent that burst forth into a mighty popular revolt.

Perhaps the most important cause of the popular discontent was the economic exploitation of the country by the British and the complete destruction of its traditional economic fabric; both impoverished the vast mass of peasants, artisans, and handicraftsmen as also a large number of traditional zamindars and chiefs. We have traced the disastrous economic impact of early British rule in another chapter. Other general causes were the British land and land revenue policies and the systems of law and administration. In particular, a large number of peasant proprietors lost their lands to traders and money-lenders and found themselves hopelessly involved in debt. In addition, common people were hard hit by the prevalence of corruption at the lower levels of administration. The police, petty officials, and lower law-courts were notoriously corrupt, William Edwards, a British official, wrote in 1859 while discussing the causes of the Revolt that the police were "a scourge to the people" and that "their oppressions and exactions form one of the chief grounds of dissatisfaction with our government." The petty officials lost no opportunity of enriching themselves at the cost of the ryots and the zamindars.

The complex judicial system enabled the rich to oppress the poor. Thus

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the growing poverty of the people made them desperate and led them to join a general revolt in the hope of improving their lot.

The middle and upper classes of Indian society, particularly in the North, were hard hit by their exclusion from the well-paid higher posts in the administration. The gradual disappearance of Indian states deprived those Indians, who were employed in them in high administrative and judicial posts, of any visible means of livelihood. British supremacy also led to the ruin of persons who made a living by following cultural pursuits. The Indian rulers had been patrons of arts and literature and had supported religious preachers and divines. Displacement of these rulers by the East India Company meant the sudden withdrawal of this patronage and the impoverishment of those who had depended upon it. Religious preachers, *pandits* and *maulavis*, who felt that their entire future was threatened, were to play an important role in spreading hatred against the foreign rule.

Another basic cause of the unpopularity of British rule was its very foreignness. The British remained perpetual foreigners in the country. For one, there was no social link or communication between them and the Indians. Unlike foreign conquerors before them, they did not mix socially even with the upper classes of Indians; instead, they had a feeling of racial superiority and treated Indians with contempt and arrogance. As Sayyid Ahmad Khan wrote later: "Even natives of the highest rank never came into the presence of officials but with an inward fear and trembling." Most of all, the British, did not come to settle in India and to make it their home. Their main aim was to enrich themselves and then go back to Britain along with their wealth. The people of India were aware of this basically foreign character of the new rulers. They refused to recognise the British as their benefactors and looked with suspicion upon every act of theirs. They had thus a vague sort of anti-British feeling which had found expression even earlier than the Revolt in numerous popular uprisings against the British. Munshi Mohanlal of Delhi, who remained loyal to the British during the Revolt, wrote later that even "those who had grown rich under British rule showed hidden delight at British reverses." Another loyalist, Muinuddin Hasan Khan, pointed out that the people looked upon the British as "foreign trespassers."

The period of the growth of discontent among the people coincided with certain events which shattered the general belief in the invincibility of British arms and encouraged the people to believe that the days of the British regime were numbered. The British army suffered major reverses in the First Afghan War (1838-42) and the Punjab Wars (1845-49), and the Crimean War (1854-56). In 1855-56 the Santhal tribesmen of Bihar and Bengal rose up armed with axes and bows and arrows and revealed the potentialities of a popular uprising by temporarily sweeping away British rule from their area. Though the British ultimately won these wars and suppressed the Santhal uprising, the disasters they suffered in major battles revealed that the British army could be defeated by determined fighting, even by an Asian army. In fact, the Indians made here a serious error of political judgment by underestimating British strength. This error was to cost the rebels of 1857 dear. At the same time the historical significance of

this factor should not be missed. People do not revolt simply because they have the desire to overthrow their rulers; they must in addition possess the confidence that they can do so successfully.

The annexation of Avadh by Lord Dalhousie in 1856 was widely resented in India in general and in Avadh in particular. More specifically, it created an atmosphere of rebellion in Avadh and in the Company's army. Dalhousie's action angered the Company's sepoys, most of whom came from Avadh. Lacking an all-India feeling, these sepoys had helped the British conquer the rest of India. But they did possess regional and local patriotism and did not like that their homelands should come under the foreigner's sway. Moreover, the annexation of Avadh adversely affected the sepoy's purse. He had to pay higher taxes on the land his family held in Avadh.

The excuse Dalhousie had advanced for annexing Avadh was that he wanted to free the people from the Nawab's and taluqdars' oppression, but, in practice, the people got no relief. Indeed, the common man had now to pay higher land revenue and additional taxes on articles of food, houses, ferries, opium, and justice. Moreover, as in the rest of India, peasants and old zamindars began to lose their land to new zamindars and money-lenders. The dissolution of the Nawab's administration and army threw out of jobs thousands of nobles, gentlemen, and officials together with their retainers and officers and soldiers and created unemployment in almost every peasant's home. Similarly, merchants, shopkeepers, and handicraftsmen who had catered to the Avadh Court and nobles lost their livelihood. The British provided no alternative employment to these people. Moreover, the British confiscated the estates of a majority of the taluqdars or zamindars. These dispossessed taluqdars became the most dangerous opponents of British rule.

The annexation of Avadh, along with the other annexations of Dalhousie, created panic among rulers of the native states. They now discovered that their most grovelling loyalty to the British had failed to satisfy the British greed for territory. What is of even greater importance, the political prestige of the British suffered a great deal because of the manner in which they had repeatedly broken their written and oral pledges and treaties with the Indian powers and reduced them to subordination while pretending and claiming to be their friends and protectors. This policy of annexation was, for example, directly responsible for making Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi, and Bahadur Shah their staunch enemies. Nana Sahib was the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa. The British refused to grant Nana Sahib the pension they were paying to Baji Rao II, who died in 1851. Similarly, the British insistence on the annexation of Jhansi incensed the proud Rani Lakshmi Bai who wanted her adopted son to succeed her deceased husband. The house of the Mughuls was humbled when Dalhousie announced in 1849 that the successor to Bahadur Shah would have to abandon the historic Red Fort and move to a humbler residence at the Qutab on the outskirts of Delhi. And, in 1856, Canning announced that after Bahadur Shah's death the Mughuls would lose the title of kings and would be

known as mere princes.

An important role in turning the people against British rule was played by their fear that it endangered their religion. This fear was largely due to the activities of the Christian missionaries who were “to be seen everywhere—in the schools, in the hospitals, in the prisons and at the market places.” These missionaries tried to convert people and made violent and vulgar public attacks on Hinduism and Islam. They openly ridiculed and denounced the long cherished customs and traditions of the people. They were, moreover, provided police protection. The actual conversions made by them appeared to the people as living proofs of the threat to their religion. Popular suspicion that the alien Government supported the activities of the missionaries was strengthened by certain acts of the Government and the actions of some of its officials. In 1850, the Government enacted a law which enabled a convert to Christianity to inherit his ancestral property. Moreover, the Government maintained at its cost chaplains or Christian priests in the army. Many officials, civil as well as military, considered it their religious duty to encourage missionary propaganda and to provide instruction in Christianity in government schools and even in jails. The activities of such officials filled the people with fear, and this fear seemed to find confirmation when they read in 1857 that R.D. Mangles had told the House of Commons:

**Providence has entrusted the extensive empire of Hindustan to England, in order that the banner of Christ should wave triumphantly from one end of India to the other. Everyone must exert all his strength in the country the grand work of making India Christian.**

The conservative religious sentiments of many people were also aroused by some of the humanitarian measures which the Government had undertaken on the advice of Indian reformers! They believed that an alien Christian government had no right to interfere in, or reform, their religion

and customs. Abolition of the custom of *Sati*, legalisation of widows' remarriage, and the opening of Western education to girls appeared to them as examples of such undue interference. Religious sentiments were also hurt by the official policy of taxing lands belonging to temples and mosques and to their priests or the charitable institutions which had been exempted from taxation by previous Indian rulers. Moreover, the many Brahmin and Muslim families dependent on these lands were aroused to fury, and they began to propagate that the British were trying to undermine the religions of India.

The Revolt of 1857 started with the mutiny of Company's sepoys. We have therefore to examine why the sepoys, who had by their devoted service enabled the Company to conquer India, suddenly became rebellious. Here the first fact to be kept in view is that the sepoys were after all a part of Indian society and, therefore, felt and suffered to some extent what other Indians did. The Hopes, desires, and despairs of the other sections of society were reflected in them. If their near and dear ones suffered / from the destructive economic consequences of British rule, they ia (urn felt this suffering. They were also duly affected by the general belief that the British were interfering in their religions and were determined to convert Indians to Christianity. Their own experience predisposed them to such a belief. They knew that the army was. maintaining chaplains at state cost. Moreover, some of the British officers in their religious ardour carried on Christian propaganda among the sepoys. The sepoys also had religious or caste grievances of their own. The Indians of those days were very strict in observing caste rules, etc, The military authorities forbade the sepoys to wear caste and sectarian marks, beards, or turbans. In 1856 an Act was passed under which every new recruit undertook to serve even overseas, if required. This hurt the sepoys' sentiments as, according to the current religious beliefs of the Hindus, travel across the sea was forbidden and led to loss of caste.

The sepoys also had numerous other grievances against their employers. They were treated with contempt by their British officers. A contempo- lary English observer noted that "the officers and men have not been friends hut strangers to one another. The sepoy is esteemed an inferior creature. He is sworn at. He is treated roughly. He is spoken of as a 'nigger'. He is addressed as a 'suar' or pig—The younger men ... treat him as an inferior animal." Even though a sepoy was as good a soldier as his British counterpart, he was paid much les'J and lodged and fed in a far worse manner than the latter. Moreover, he had little prospect of a rise; no Indian could rise higher than a *subedar* drawing. 60 to 70 rupees a month. In fact, the sepoy's life Was quite hard. Naturally, the sepoy resented this artificial<sup>1</sup> and enforced position of inferiority. As the British historian T.R. Holmes has put it:

*J/* Though he might give signs of the military genius of a Hyder, he knew that he could never attain the pay of an English subaltern and that the rank to which he might attain, after some 30 years of faithful service, would not protect him from the Insolent dictation of an ensign freuh from England.

A more immediate cause of the sepoys' dissatisfaction was the recent order that they would not be given the foreign service allowance (*bat/a*) when serving in Sindh or in the Punjab. This order resulted in a big cut in the salaries of a large

.number of them. The annexation of Avadh, the home of many sepoys, further inflamed their feelings.

The dissatisfaction of the sepoys had in fact a long history, A sepoy mutiny had broken out in Bengal as early as 1764. The authorities had suppressed it by blowing away 30 sepoys from the mouths of guns. In 1806 the sepoys at Vellore mutinied but were crushed with terrible violence. In 1824, the 47th Regiment of sepoys at Barrackpore refused to go to Burma by the sea-route. The Regiment was disbanded, its unarmed men were fired upon by artillery, and the leaders of the sepoys were hanged. In 1844, seven battalions revolted on the question of salaries and *batta*. Similarly, the sepoys in Afghanistan were on the verge of revolt during the Afghan War. Two *subedars*, a Muslim and a Hindu, were shot dead for giving expression to the discontent in the army. Dissatisfaction was so widespread among the sepoys that Fredrick Halliday, Lieutenant- Governor of Bengal in 1858, was led to remark that the Bengal Army was "more or less mutinous, always on the verge of revolt and certain to have mutinied at one time or another as soon as provocation might combine with opportunity."

Thus widespread and intense dislike and even hatred of the foreign rule prevailed among large numbers of Indian people and soldiers of the Company's army. This feeling was later summed up by Saiyid Ahmad Khan in his *Causes of the Indian Mutiny* as follows;

At length, the Indians fell into the habit of thinking that all laws were passed with a view to degrade and ruin them and to deprive them and their compatriots of their religion... , At last came the time when all men looked upon the English government as slow poison, a rope of sand, a treacherous flame of fire. They began to believe that if today they escaped from the clutches of the government, tomorrow they would fall into them or that even if they escaped the morrow, the third day would see their ruin... The people wished for a change in the Government, and rejoiced heartily at the idea of British rule being superseded by another.

Similarly, a proclamation issued by the rebels in Delhi complained:

Firstly, in Hindustan they have exacted as revenue Rupees 300 where only 200 were due, and Rupees 500 where but 400 were demandable, and still they *ait* solicitous to raise their demands, The people must therefore be-ruined and beggared. Secondly, they have-doubled and quadrupled and raised tenfold the Chowkeodaree Tax and have wished to ruin the people. Thirdly, the occupation of all respectable and learned men is gone, and million\* ue destitute of the necessities of life. When any one in search of employment determines on proceeding

from one Zillahi to another, every soul is charged six pie as toll on roads, and has to pay from 4 to 8 aonahs for each cart. Those only who pay are permitted to travel on the public roads. How far can we detail the oppression, of the Tyrants! Gradually matters arrived at such a pitch that the Government had determined to subvert everyone's religion.

The Revolt of 1857 came as the culmination of popular discontent with British policies and imperialist exploitation. But it was no sudden occurrence; the discontent had been accumulating for a long time. Many shrewd British officials had taken note of it and issued stern warnings. Surer and clearer indications of the gathering storm were a series of rebellions and revolts against British authority ever since its establishment in India in 1757. Hundreds of such uprisings have been recorded by historians. Perhaps the most famous of these are the Kutch Rebellion, the Kol Uprising of 1831 and the Santhal Uprising of 1855. The Kutch Rebellion, led by its chiefs, lasted in one form or another from 1816 to 1832. The Kol tribesmen of Chota Nagpur rebelled against the British for imposing on them outsiders as money-lenders and landlords. Thousands of Kols perished before British authority could be reimposed. The causes of the Santhal Uprising were primarily economic and it was directed against the money-lenders and their protectors, the British authorities. The Santhals arose in their thousands and proclaimed a government of their own in the area between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal. They were ultimately suppressed in 1856.

#### The Immediate Cause

By 1857, the material for a mass upheaval was ready, only a spark was needed to set it afire. The pent up discontent of the people needed a focus, an immediate issue, on which it could be concentrated. The episode of the greased cartridges provided this spark for the sepoys and their mutiny provided the general populace the occasion to revolt.

The new Enfield rifle had been first introduced in the army. Its cartridges had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off before the cartridge was loaded into the rifle. The grease was in some instances composed of beef and pig fat. The sepoys, Hindu as well as Muslim, were enraged. The use of the greased cartridges would endanger their religion. Many of them believed that the Government was deliberately trying to destroy their religion. The time to rebel had come.

#### The Beginning of Revolt

It is not yet clear whether the Revolt of 1857 was spontaneous and unplanned or the result of a careful and secret organisation. A peculiar aspect of the study of the history of the Revolt of 1857 is that it has to be based almost entirely on British records, The rebels have left behind no records. As they worked illegally, they perhaps kept no records. Moreover, they were defeated and suppressed and their version of events died with them. Lastly, for years afterwards, the British suppressed any favourable mention of the Revolt, and took strong action against anyone who tried to present their side of the story.

One group of historians and writers has asserted that the Revolt was the result of a widespread and well-organised conspiracy. They point to the circulation of

*chappattis* and red lotuses, propaganda by wandering *sanyasis*, *faqirs* and *madaris*. They say that many of the Indian regiments were carefully linked in a secret organisation which had fixed 31 May 1857 as the day when all of them were to revolt. It is also said that Nana Sahib and Maulavi Ahmad Shah of Faizabad were playing leading roles in this conspiracy. Other writers equally forcefully deny that any careful planning went into the making of the Revolt. They point out that not a scrap of paper was discovered before or after the Revolt indicating an organised conspiracy, nor did a single witness come forward to make such a claim. The truth perhaps lies somewhere between these two extreme views. It seems likely that there *was* an organised conspiracy to revolt but that the organisation had not progressed sufficiently when the Revolt broke out accidentally.

The Revolt began at Meerut, 36 miles from Delhi, on 10 May 1857 and then gathering force rapidly it cut across Northern India like a sword. It soon embraced a vast area from the Punjab in the North and the Narmada in the South to Bihar in the East and Rajputana in the West.

Even before the outbreak at Meerut, Mangal Pande had become a martyr at Barrackpore. Mangal Pande, a young soldier, was hanged on 29 March 1857 for revolting single-handed and attacking his superior officers. This and many similar incidents were a sign that discontent and rebellion were brewing among the sepoy. And then came the explosion at Meerut—On 24 April ninety men of the 3rd Native Cavalry refused to accept the greased cartridges. On 9 May eighty five of them were dismissed, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and put into fetters. This sparked off a general mutiny among the Indian soldiers stationed at Meerut. The very next day, on 10 May, they released their imprisoned comrades, killed their officers, and unfurled the banner of revolt. As if drawn by a magnet they set off for Delhi after its onset. When the Meerut soldiers appeared in Delhi the next morning, the local infantry joined them, killed their own European officers, and seized the city. The rebellious soldiers now proclaimed the aged and powerless Bahadur Shah the Emperor of India, Delhi was soon to become the centre of the Great Revolt and Bahadur Shah its great symbol. This spontaneous raising of the last Mughal king to the leadership of the country was recognition of the fact that the long reign of the Mughal dynasty had made it the traditional symbol of India's political unity. With this single act, the sepoys had transformed a mutiny of soldiers into a revolutionary war. This is why rebellious sepoys from all over the country automatically turned their steps towards Delhi and all Indian chiefs who took part in the Revolt hastened to proclaim their loyalty to the Mughal Emperor. Bahadur Shah, in turn, under the instigation and perhaps the pressure of the sepoys, soon 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. Avadh, Rohilkhand, the Doab, the Bundelkhand, Central India, large parts of Bihar, and the East Punjab—all shook off British authority. In many of the princely states, rulers remained loyal to their British overlord but the soldiers revolted

or remained on the brink of revolt. Many of Indore's troops rebelled and joined the sepoys. Similarly over 20,000 of Gwalior's troops went over to Tantia Tope and the Rani of Jhansi. Many small chiefs of Rajasthan and Maharashtra revolted with the support of the people who were quite hostile to the British. Local rebellions also occurred in Hyderabad and Bengal.

The tremendous sweep and breadth of the Revolt was matched by its depth. Everywhere in Northern and Central India, the mutiny of the sepoys was followed by popular revolts of the civilian population. After the sepoys had destroyed British authority, the common people rose up in arms often fighting with spears and axes, bows and arrows, lathis and scythes, and crude muskets. In many places, however, the people revolted even before the sepoys did or even when no sepoy regiments were present. It is the wide participation in the Revolt by the peasantry and the artisans which gave it real strength as well as the character of a popular revolt, especially in the areas at present included in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Here the peasants and zamindars gave free expression to their grievances "by attacking the money-lenders and new zamindars who had displaced them from the land. They took advantage of the Revolt to destroy the money-lenders' account books and records of debts. They also attacked the British-established law courts, revenue offices (*tehsils*) and revenue records, and *thanas*. It is of some importance to note that in many of the battles commoners far surpassed the sepoys in numbers. According to one estimate, of the total number of about 150,000 men who died fighting (the English in Avadh, over 100,000 were civilians.

It should also be noted that even where people did not rise up in revolt, they showed strong sympathy for the rebels. They rejoiced in the successes of the rebels and organised social boycott of those sepoys who remained loyal to the British. They showed active hostility to British forces, refused to give them help or information, and even misled them with wrong information. W.H. Russel, who toured India in 1858 and 1859 as the correspondent of the *London Times*, wrote that:

In no instance is a friendly glance directed to the white man's carriage. . . Oh! that language of the eye! Who can doubt? Who can misinterpret it? It is by it alone that I have learnt our race is not even feared at times by many and that by all it is disliked.

The popular character of the Revolt of 1857 also became evident when the British tried to crush it. They had to wage a vigorous and ruthless war not only against the rebellious sepoys but also against the people of Delhi, Avadh, North-Western Provinces and Agra, Central India, and Western Bihar, burning entire villages and massacring villagers and urban people. They had to cow down people with public hangings and executions without trial, thus revealing how deep the revolt was in these parts. The sepoys and the people fought staunchly and valiantly up to the very end. They were defeated but their spirit remained unbroken. As Rey. Duff remarked: "It was not a military revolt but a rebellion or revolution which alone can account for the little progress hitherto made in extinguishing it." Similarly, the correspondent of the *London Times* noted at the time that the British had virtually to

'reconquer' India.

Much of the strength of the Revolt of 1857 lay in Hindu-Muslim unity. Among the soldiers and the people as well as among the leaders there was complete cooperation as between Hindus and Muslims. All the rebels recognised Bahadur Shah, a Muslim, as their Emperor. Also the first thoughts of the Hindu sepoys at Meerut was to march straight to Delhi. The Hindu and Muslim rebels and sepoys respected each other's sentiments. For example, wherever the Revolt was successful, orders were immediately issued banning cow-slaughter out of respect for Hindu sentiments. Moreover, Hindus and Muslims were equally well represented at all levels of the leadership. The role of Hindu-Muslim unity in the Revolt was indirectly acknowledged later by Aitchison, a senior British official, when he bitterly complained: "In this instance we could not play off the Mohammedans against the Hindus". In fact the events of 1857 clearly bring out that the people and politics of India were not basically communal in medieval times and before 1858.

The storm-centres of the Revolt of 1857\* were at Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi, and Arrah in Bihar. At Delhi the nominal and symbolic leadership belonged to the Emperor Bahadur Shah, but the real command lay with a Court of Soldiers headed by General Bakht Khan who had led the revolt of the Bareilly troops and brought them to Delhi. In the British army he had been an ordinary *subedar* of artillery. Bakht Khan represented the popular and plebian element at the headquarters of the Revolt. After the British occupation of Delhi in September 1857,



*Bahadur Shah II Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi*

he went to Lucknow and continued to fight the British till he died in a battle on 13 May 1859. The Emperor Bahadur Shah was perhaps the weakest link in the chain of leadership of the Revolt. He was not firm even in his support of the Revolt.

He had little genuine sympathy for the humble sepoys who in turn did not trust him fully. He was angered by the assertion of authority by the leaders of the sepoys. He vacillated between the desire to reign as Emperor and the desire to save his skin in case the Revolt was crushed by the British. His position was also undermined by his favourite Queen Zeenat Mahal and his sons who carried on intrigues with the enemy. His weak personality and old age and his lack of qualities of leadership created political weakness at the nerve centre of the Revolt and did incalculable damage to it.



*Zinat Mahal, Wife of Bahadur Shah II Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi*

At Kanpur the Revolt was led by Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa. Nana Sahib expelled the English from Kanpur with the help of the sepoys and proclaimed himself the Peshwa. At the same time he acknowledged Bahadur Shah as the Emperor of India and declared himself to be his Governor. The chief burden of fighting on behalf of Nana Sahib fell on the shoulders of Tantia Tope, one of his most loyal servants. Tantia Tope has won immortal fame by his patriotism, determined fighting, and skillful guerrilla operations. Azi- mullah was another loyal servant of Nana Sahib. He was an expert in political propaganda. Unfortunately, Nana Sahib tarnished his brave record by deceitfully killing the garrison at Kanpur after he had agreed to give them safe conduct.



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The Residency, Lucknow *Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi*

The revolt at Lucknow was led by the Begum of Avadh who had proclaimed her young son, Birjis Kadr, as the Nawab of Avadh. Helped by the sepoys at Lucknow, and by the zamindars and peasants of Avadh, the Begum organised an all-out attack on the British. Compelled to give up the city, the latter entrenched themselves in the Residency building. In the end, the Siege of the Residency failed as the small British garrison fought back with exemplary fortitude and valour.



Rani Lakshmibai and Tantia Tope Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi

One of the great leaders of the Revolt of 1857 and perhaps one of the greatest heroines of Indian history, was the young Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. The young Rani joined the rebels when the British refused to acknowledge her right to adopt an heir to the Jhansi *gaddi*, annexed her state, and threatened to treat her as an instigator of the rebellion of the sepoys at Jhansi. The Rani vacillated for some time. But once she had decided to throw in her lot with the rebels, she fought like a (true heroine; tales of her bravery and courage and military skill have inspired her countrymen ever since. Driven out of Jhansi by the British forces after a fierce battle in which "even women were seen working the batteries and distributing ammunition", she administered the oath to her followers that "with our own hands we shall not our *Azadshahi* (independent rule) bury". She captured Gwalior with

the help of Tantia Tope and her trusted Afghan guards. Maharaja Sindhia, loyal to the British, made an attempt to fight the English but most of his troops deserted to her. Sindhia sought refuge with the English at Agra. The brave Rani died fighting on 17-June 1858, clad in the battle dress of a soldier and mounted on a charger. Beside her fell her life-long friend and companion, a Muslim girl.

Kunwar Singh, a ruined and discontented zamindar of Jagdishpur near Arrah, was the chief organiser of the Revolt in Bihar. Though nearly 80 years old, he was perhaps the most outstanding military leader and strategist of the Revolt. He fought the British in Bihar, and, later joining hands with Nana Sahib's forces, he also campaigned in Avadh and Central India. Racing back home he defeated the British forces near Arrah. But this proved to be his last battle. He had sustained a fatal wound in the fighting. He died on 27 April 1858 in his ancestral house in the village of Jagdishpur.

Maulavi Alunadullali of Faizabad was another outstanding leader of the Revolt. He was a native of Madras where he had started preaching armed rebellion. In January 1857 he moved towards the North to Faizabad where he fought a large-scale battle against a company of British troops sent to stop him from preaching sedition. When the general Revolt broke out in May, he emerged as one of its acknowledged leaders in Avadh. After the defeat at Lucknow, he led the rebellion in Rohilkhand where he was treacherously killed by the Raja of Purnea who was paid Rs.

50,000 as a reward by the British. Maulavi Ahmadullah's patriotism, valour, and military ability have won him high praise even from British historians. Colonel G.B. Mallett has written of him:

**If a patriot is a man who plots and fights for the independence, wrongfully destroyed, of his native country, then most certainly the Maulavi was a true patriot.**

**He had fought manfully, honourably, and stubbornly in the field against the strangers who had seized his country, and his memory is entitled to the respect of the brave and the true liegemen of all nations.**

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

cartridges but now to expel the hated foreigner they freely used the same cartridges in their battles.

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. 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 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 the taluqdars (big zamindars) of Avadh, 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 Avadh 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. But 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 British rule would help them accomplish these tasks of modernisation while the rebels would take the country backward. Only later did the educated Indians learn from experience that foreign rule

was incapable of modernising 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 a common plan of action, or authoritative heads, or centralised 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 power to create in its place. They failed to evolve unity of action. They were suspicious and jealous of one another and often indulged in suicidal quarrels. For example, the Begum of Avadh quarrelled with Maulavi Ahmadullah and the Mughal princes with the sepoy-generals; Azimullah, the political adviser of Nana Saheb, asked him not to visit Delhi lest he be overshadowed by the Emperor. Thus, selfishness and cliquishness of the leaders sapped the strength of the Revolt and prevented its consolidation. Similarly, the peasantry having destroyed revenue records and money-lenders' books, and overthrown the new zamindars, became passive, not knowing what to do next. The British succeeded in crushing the leaders of the Revolt one by one.

In fact, the weakness of the Revolt went deeper than the failings of individuals. The entire movement lacked a unified and forward-looking programme to be implemented after the capture of power. The movement, thus, came to consist of diverse elements, united only by their hatred of British rule, but each having 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. And, since the same feudal leaders, the Mughals, the Marathas and others, had earlier failed in preserving the independence of their kingdoms, it was hardly to be expected that they would now succeed in founding a new all-India State. But the feudal character of the Revolt should not be stressed overmuch. 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. 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 princes of India."

The lack of unity among Indians was perhaps unavoidable at this stage of Indian history. Modern nationalism was yet unknown in India. Patriotism meant love of one's small locality or region or at most one's state. Common all-India interests and the consciousness that these interests bound all Indians together were yet to come. 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.

In the end British imperialism, at the height of its power the world over, 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, but the British mounted 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 on 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 Avadh was compelled to hide in

Nepal.

By the end of 1859, British authority over India was fully reestablished, 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 left an unforgettable Impression on the minds of the Indian people 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.

#### EXERCISES

1. To what extent was the Revolt of 1857 the result of popular discontent against foreign rule?
2. Why did the sepoys of the Company's army revolt?
3. How would you explain the failure of the Revolt?
4. Write short notes on:
  - (a) The role of the Princes in the Revolt, (b) The role of the educated Indians in the Revolt, (c) Hindu-Muslim unity in the Revolt; (d) Bahadur Shah, (e) Nana Sahib, (f) Tantia Tope, (g) Rani of Jhansi, (h) Kuvvar Singh, (i) Maulavi Ahmadullah of Faizabad.