The Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857, commonly called as the Sepoy Revolt, was the first organised revolt against British rule in India. It was the culmination of the manifold grievances that Indians had against the East India Company’s rule. It was to a great extent a popular revolt led by exiled princes and displaced landlords. The revolt was largely confined to North and Central India. The revolt failed due to various reasons, including lack of organised planning on the part of the rebels and superior strength of the British. The transfer of the Indian administration from the English East India Company to British Crown was the important result of the Revolt.

Causes Of The Revolt

It was earlier widely believed that it was merely discontent of the Sepoys that led to the Revolt. It is no more accepted. The general causes are considered to be equally important. These include economic, political, administrative, military and socio-religious causes.

Economic Causes

The economic policies of the British was the primary reason for the Revolt. The British economic policy destroyed the traditional economic fabric of country. It impoverished the vast mass of peasants, artisans and handicraftsmen. The land revenue policies like the Permanent Settlement exorbitantly raised the land revenue demand. It led to the replacement of traditional zamindars by a new class of zamindars. The new zamindars, mostly merchants, were merely interested in raising more money than improving agriculture. Artisans and handicraftsmen were affected by import of cheap machine-made clothes from England. The mercantilist policies followed also destroyed India’s external trade.

Political Causes

Dalhousie had a major share in the outbreak of the Revolt. His Doctrine of Lapse created new tensions. This doctrine refused to recognise the right of the adopted sons to succeed as heirs to a protected state, unless the adoption was approved earlier by the British. It was based on this doctrine he annexed Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi. He also refused to recognise the titles of ex-rulers like the Nawabs of Surat and Carnatic and Raja of Tanjore. He refused pension to ex-rulers of India. The most important of such ex-rulers was Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the ex-Peshwa Baji Rao-II. He also decided that the Mughal successor to Bahadur Shah Zafar would have to shift from Red Fort to more humble quarter’s in Delhi’s outskirts. This was greatly resented for in the people’s mind Mughals were still considered as the rulers of India. The culmination of Dalhousie’s imperialistic policies was the annexation of Awadh on the pretext of maladministration by the reigning Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. This caused a great uproar in Awadh and caused the displacement of thousands of the ex-Nawab’s nobles and
These people were also affected by the disappearance and maulavis for these lands were hitherto not taxed. charitable institutions. This was resented by the priests belonging to temples and mosques or priests or added fuel. The Government also taxed the lands which enabled a convert to inherit his ancestral property protected civil rights of the Hindu converts), the law measures like the Religious Disabilities Act 1856 (which protection angered the people. Certain Government and centuries old tradition and customs under police prisons. Their vulgar attacks on Hinduism and Islam almost everywhere in markets, schools, hospitals and activities of the Christian missionaries who were seen thought that they were always trying to convert them that English rule was a danger to their religion. They thought that it was another instance of the Government felt the destruction of traditional socio-economic structure by the British. As has been said a sepoy was only a “peasant in uniform”. He too felt the destruction of traditional socio-economic structure by the British.

**Administrative Causes**

Under the new administrative dispensation all higher posts were reserved for Englishmen. During Lord Cornwallis’ tenure he tried to ensure that all positions of authority were out of bounds for the Indians. The Indian middle and upper class, who served the native rulers, were the worst affected. They lost their only source of livelihood. Furthermore the administration at lower levels were corrupt. Judicial and police administration seemed to favour the landlords than the poor farmer. Another aspect of British administration was its foreignness. Unlike earlier invaders, the British never tried to became a part of the Indian society. They remained aloof and were more interested in exploitation rather than development of India.

**Social And Religious Causes**

The social and religious causes played no minor role in the outbreak of the Revolt. The people feared that English rule was a danger to their religion. They thought that they were always trying to convert them to Christianity. This feeling was encouraged by the activities of the Christian missionaries who were seen almost everywhere in markets, schools, hospitals and prisons. Their vulgar attacks on Hinduism and Islam and centuries old tradition and customs under police protection angered the people. Certain Government measures like the Religious Disabilities Act 1856 (which protected civil rights of the Hindu converts), the law which enabled a convert to inherit his ancestral property added fuel. The Government also taxed the lands belonging to temples and mosques or priests or charitable institutions. This was resented by the priests and maulavis for these lands were hitherto not taxed. These people were also affected by the disappearance of native Indian rulers who were their chief patrons. This made them the sworn enemies of the English.

Certain social reforms instituted on demand by Indian social reformers were not liked by the conservative sections of the society. They viewed them as government deliberately tampering with their age-old customs. Abolition of *Sati*, the legalisation of widow remarriage, and the opening of Western education to women were regarded as instances of deliberate infringement of the government on the people’s customs.

**Seyoy Discontent/Military Causes**

A major part in the outbreak of the Revolt was undoubtedly played by seyoy discontent. Discrimination was a way of life in the English East India Company’s army. The principle of equal pay for equal work or rank had no place. The Indian seyoyes were paid less, lodged and fed far inferior to his British counterpart. He was always nearly insultingly addressed as ‘nigger’ or ‘saur’ or ‘pig’. He had no avenues for promotion. An Indian could utmost become a subedar. Unlike earlier times the soldiers no longer won any jagirs for their work. As more and more parts of India were conquered, the seyoyes lost their batta (foreign service allowance). This was a huge cut in their salary. The new rulers also hurt their religious sentiments. Thus the General Services Enlistment Act of 1856 necessitated them to serve beyond the seas. This was against the prevalent Hindu belief that overseas travel would deprive a person of the caste status. They were also forbidden to wear their caste marks. Further the seyoyes were also not immune to the economic changes brought about by British conquest. As has been said a sepoy was only a “peasant in uniform”. He too felt the destruction of traditional socio-economic structure by the British.

**Immediate Cause**

The immediate cause was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle and the greased catridges episode. The catridges of the Enfield rifle had a greased paper cover. The end of this paper had to be bitten off before the catridge was loaded into the rifle. The grease, it was suggested, was made of beef and pig fat. This enraged both Hindus and Muslims for whom it was against their religion to touch beef and pig fat. They felt that it was another instance of the Government deliberately trying to destroy their religion and convert them to Christianity.

**Centres of the Revolt**

**Meerut:** The revolt of 1857 began at Meerut on May 10, 1857. Here the seyoyes revolted against their English officers, killed them and marched to Delhi.

However it is often considered that Mangal Pande fired the first shot of the revolt. On March 29, 1857, he attacked
his superior officers at Barrackpore. He was captured and hanged to death.

**Delhi:** At Delhi the nominal head of the revolt was the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. The real head was General Bakt Khan.

**Kanpur:** The revolt was headed by Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Baji Rao-II, the last Peshwa. He was ably assisted by Tantia Tope and Azimullah.

**Lucknow:** Hazarat Mahal, the Begum of Awadh, was the leader. She proclaimed her son, Birjis Kadr, as the Nawab of Awadh.

**Jhansi:** The revolt in Jhansi was ably led by Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, one of the greatest heroines of Indian history.

**Bihar:** Kunwar Singh, a zamindar of Jagdishpur near Arrah, was the brain behind the revolt in Bihar.

**Bareilly:** The revolt was led by Khan Bahadur Khan. Another prominent leader was Maulavi Ahmadullah of Faizabad. He was one of the chief organisers of the revolt in Awadh.

### Causes For the Failure

In spite of being a popular revolt, the revolt failed to achieve its objective. The main reasons were:

(i) **Lack of unity:** The revolt was supported and led by a few discontented rulers of India. The majority of the Indian rulers remained aloof. These included the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkar of Indore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Raja of Jodhpur, the Nawab of Bhopal, the Sikh chieftains of Punjab, the Maharaja of Kashmir, the Ranas of Nepal and so on. They in fact gave active help to the British to suppress the revolt. Canning referred to these chieftains as having “acted as breakwaters to the storm, which would have otherwise swept us in one great wave”.

(ii) **Lack of support:** The Revolt was not supported by all classes of the society. The upper and middle classes were critical of the rebels. The money-lenders, who were chiefly attacked and the merchants slowly turned hostile. The Revolt was not supported by the modern educated Indians. They falsely believed that the English rule was essential for modernising India. They were also alarmed by the rebel’s appeals to superstitions and their staunch opposition to progressive social measures.

(iii) **Lack of modern equipments:** The rebels were constrained by the shortage of modern weapons and other materials of war. While the English fought with modern weapons, the rebels fought with such ancient weapons as pikes and swords. Further the rebels were poorly organised, ill-disciplined and lacked common military plans.

(iv) **Lack of centralised leadership:** The rebels did not have a unified command structure. It was their common hatred of the British that brought the rebel leaders together.

Once the British were ousted, they did not have a political structure to replace it. They were also suspicious and jealous of one another and often indulged in suicidal quarrels. But an attempt to build an organisation was made. At Delhi, for example, a Court of administrators, consisting of ten members, six armymen and four civilians was established. All its decisions were taken by a majority vote. But with the capture of Delhi on September 20, 1857 this edifice disappeared.

(v) **Localised nature:** The Revolt was confined to parts of North and Central India. Madras, Bombay, Bengal and the Western Punjab were relatively undisturbed.

(vi) **Lack of an alternative plan:** The rebels had no alternative to British administration. This point has been highlighted by Bipin Chandra. According to him “It lacked a forward-looking programme, coherent ideology, a political perspective or a vision of the future society and economy”.

### Results

The Revolt of 1857 had far-reaching political, military, social and economic results.

**Political:** The administration of India now passed from the English East India Company to the British crown by the Government of India Act, 1858. A Secretary of State of India was appointed in England. He was to be assisted by a 15-member advisory council. The Queen’s Proclamation also promised to discontinue the practice of annexation, and recognise adoption. Religious freedom was also assured. The proclamation also assured political reforms which were fulfilled to some extent by the 1861 Councils Act.

**Military:** The military administration was strengthened. The number of European troops were increased and all artillery units were placed in European hands. The different classes of sepoys were mixed. All important posts in the army were reserved for the English.

**Social:** The English felt that their social reforms were a cause for the Revolt. So they began to tread cautiously in this regard. They also started encouraging such social conservatives against nationalists during the freedom
movement. It also increased racial bitterness between the English and Indians.

**Economic:** The Revolt also brought massive economic destruction. Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur were completely destroyed. The public debt of the country rose by about 98 million sterling.

**Other impact:** A positive aspect of the Revolt was that it laid the foundation for the later nationalist movement. The Revolt was a beacon for the later nationalist leaders. The exploits of the Revolt leaders inspired them to take on the mighty British empire.

**Character Of The Revolt**

The character of revolt of 1857 has been a subject of much debate. It has been declared as the first war of Indian independence by V.D. Savarkar in his book *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*. He has been supported by Dr. S.N. Sen (*Eighteen Fifty-Seven*), Tarachand and Ashok Mehta. The British authors like Sir J.W. Kaye (*A History of the Sepoy War in India*), G.B. Malleson (*Indian Mutiny of 1857*) and C.T. Metcalfe have called the Revolt as mere Sepoy Mutiny. R.C. Majumdar also doesnot consider the Revolt to be of a nationalistic in nature.

The Revolt has also been described as a “religious war against the Christians”, “racial struggle for supremacy between the Black and White”, “a struggle between Oriental and Occidental civilisation and culture” and a “Hindu-Muslim conspiracy to overthrow the British rule”.

The Revolt of 1857, to conclude was caused due to many reasons. It also had manifold results. The Revolt failed in its objective of driving out the British. Yet it had a longterm impact of being a source of inspiration for the nationalists during the later freedom struggle.

**Books on the revolt**

i) *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* – V.D. Savarkar  
ii) *History of Indian Mutiny* – T.R. Holmes  
iii) *A History of the Sepoy War in India* – Sir J.W. Kaye  
v) *The Sepoy Revolt, its Causes and its Consequences* – H. Mead  
vi) *Eighteen Fifty Seven* – S.N. Sen  