

The Insurrection of 1857 in British India: The First war of Independence

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ABSTRACT:

The Mutiny of 1857 proved to be a land mark in the history of India. This Mutiny ended the company's rule. However, after the war the rule of the British Crown began. Not only common people took part in the Mutiny but also the princes, the Nawabs, the Rajas, the rulers, the Zamindars and even the Sepoys took interest in the Mutiny. During the Mutiny, the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar (1837-1862) was proclaimed as the Emperor of India. The Mutiny began on 10th May 1857 and then spread like wildfire to different parts of the country. The people and the Sepoys rose to the rebellion against the unlawful activities of the British Govt. By this Article a better understanding about the insurgency of 1857 has been made to know the actual cause behind the Mutiny and to know why the Indians felt dissatisfied with the British Govt. This Article helps us to reconstruct the History of the Mutiny of 1857, to know the nature and background of the Mutiny, the beginning of the Mutiny, the causes of the Mutiny, the spread or the main events of the Mutiny, the failure of the Mutiny and the result or the outcome of the Mutiny of 1857.

KEYWORDS: Indian Mutiny of 1857, Sepoys, Company's rule in India (1757-1858), British rule in India (1858-1947), Nawabs, Rajas, Maharajas, Rulers, Begum, first war of Independence.

I. **INTRODUCTION:** The Revolt of 1857 was the first major challenge to the East India Company and literally put comma to the colonial ambitions of its masters in England. During the Revolt, which took place in many parts of Central, Northern, and Eastern part of India, different sections of society joined the rebel sepoy's of the East India Company in what has been described by some scholars as First War of Indian Independence. {1} It was on 10th May 1857 that the Mutiny began at Meerut. The Mutiny then spread to different parts of the country. The people from all over India proclaimed the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as the Emperor of India. Different policies as devised by the Governor General lord Wellesley (1798-1803) and the Governor General of India that time i.e lord Dalhousie (1848-1856) had created unrest among the rulers and Nawabs of the princely states. Punjab, Sindh and Awadh were annexed under the policy of Subsidiary Alliance and Satara (1848), Sambhalpur (1849), Jhansi (1854), Nagpur (1854) and Awadh (1856) were annexed under the policy of Doctrine of Lapse. Different Historians had given their different views about the Mutiny of 1857. Some Historians called it as Sepoy's Mutiny, while some others called it as a war between the people of India and the British Govt. because the Indians were insulted in every possible way by the British Govt. According to some other Historians like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar described it as first war of Independence because of the participation of not only of Sepoys but also of people of India.

II. **Methodology:** This Article is based on various sources i.e both internal as well as external. It involves the use of both oral and Historical sources. This Article is written with the help of some secondary sources like newspapers, journals and books etc

III. **The outbreak and the Causes of the Mutiny :** How did the Mutiny began? What were the causes for the outbreak of the Mutiny? Why did the rulers, Nawabs, Rajas, common people including peasants, Zamindars and even the Sepoys rose to rebellion against the British and wanted to overthrow the rule of the British. The reason for this was the pitiless exploitation of the Indian people by the British. There are different causes which were responsible for the outbreak of the Mutiny of 1857. These are:-

1. Immediate Cause :

It was on 29th March, 1857 that a young soldier Mangal Pandey of 34th Native infantry fired at his Senior Lieutenant Baugh at Barrackpur over the issue of newly greased cartridges which were thought to be greased with the pork (fats of pig) and beef (fats of Cow). As the Cow was sacred to the Hindus and the pig was a Taboo for the Muslims that's why Mangal

Pandey opened a fire at his senior. After this, there was wide spread rumour among the Sepoys about this hidden Propaganda of the British thus, Insulting the Sepoys and the common people by hurting them on religion basis. Mangal Pandey was finally hanged on 8th April 1857. Later on, Ninety men of the 3rd Native Cavalry at Meerut refused to use such newly greased cartridges on 24th April 1857. The refusal results in the dismissal of eighty five of them from their services and were also sentenced to 10 years confinement on 9th May 1857. Next morning i.e on 10th May 1857, the Mutiny Began at Meerut and the Sepoys started their movement towards Delhi where they proclaimed the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as their Shahenshah-i-Hindustan or the Emperor of India.

When the rebel sepoy raised the banner of revolt against the Raj, after decades of discontentment against the colonial policies of the British, the Rajas were shocked. They set out to help the Raj in suppressing the revolt with an iron hand. The company officials, who might have fled to their native country, if the revolt had succeeded in overthrowing the company rule, acted fast in acknowledging the favour and support of these Rajas. Even the appeal of Bahadur Shah Zafar went in vain. Bahadur Shah Zafar in his address to Indian Rajas said on May 20, 1857: 'All you Rajas are famed for your virtues, noble qualities and liberality, and are moreover the protectors of your own faith and of the faith others. It is incumbent therefore on such of you as have the power to kill those who may injure your religion...and thus protect your faith...' {2}

2. Political Cause:

The British followed the policy of expansion by introducing the policy of Doctrine of lapse also known as annexation policy. This policy was devised by the Governor General Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856). According to this policy, any ruler who died without a direct heir or who is weak and not able to rule, then his /her territory would automatically be annexed according to this annexation policy. The ruler also could not adopt a son if they had no direct heir. This created fear in the minds of other ruling families.

Rani Lakshmi Bai's adopted son was not permitted to sit on the throne of Jhansi. Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi were annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse. Jaitpur, Sambalpur and Udaipur were also annexed. Other rulers feared that the annexation of their states was only a matter of time. The refusal to continue the pension of Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Baji Rao II, created hostility among the ruling class. {3}

By doing so, the British Govt. hurt the sentiments of the Indian people. They felt broken because they were rendered jobless, hopeless, helpless etc. which results in the discontentment among different sections of the society against the British Govt.

3. Social cause:

During the revolt of 1857, the Indian people were outraged because of rapid spread of western civilization in India. People belonging to different class of society were treated very poorly. They had to work and fight for the British Govt. Despite having given them very low salaries. Besides this, the interference with the customs and traditions of the Indian people made them realise that the British Govt was going to devastate the culture of the people of India which aroused the feeling of discontentment among the people against the British Govt. and thus they wanted to get rid of such rule for which they revolted against the British.

4. Religious cause:

Another cause for the outbreak of the mutiny of 1857 was due to the passage of an Act in the year 1850 which changed the Hindu law of inheritance. According to which, a Hindu who had converted to Christianity can inherit the property of their ancestors. Other sources provide us the information about the Christian missionaries which were started by the British Govt. in order to convert every Indian into Christianity which was totally against the religion of both Hindus and Muslims. Besides, the Govt. Interference with the religion of both these communities hurt the sentiments of Indian people. Interference with certain prevailing laws like the Abolition of sati, female infanticide and permitting widows to remarry and legalizing such laws were great threats to the whole society in India that time and that's why the Indian people felt hurt because of passing and legalizing such laws and so people were outraged and turned against the British Govt. and decided to free themselves from their rule.

5. Economic cause:

The economic condition of the people of India during 1857 was not good. The heavy taxation and the discriminatory tariff policies had given a tough blow to the Indian people including peasants, artisans, zamindars etc. all of which were affected badly because of the destruction of handicrafts.

In rural areas, peasants and zamindars resented the heavy taxes on land and the stringent methods of revenue collection followed by the Company. Many among these groups were unable to meet the heavy revenue demands and repay their loans to money lenders, eventually losing the lands that they had held for generations. {4}

The people who were not able to repay their loans or those who were not able to give such taxes which were imposed by the British Govt. rendered hopeless, helpless, jobless and remained unemployed for most part of the Year and died of poverty and starvation. Besides this, their landed property was also confiscated by the British which created the feeling of discontentment among the people of India and so they turned against the British Govt. which in turn leads to the outbreak of the Mutiny of 1857.

6. **Military cause:**

The Mutiny of 1857 according to some historians started as a Sepoy Mutiny. However, later on people belonging to different classes of the society also took part in the Mutiny. The Indian Sepoys worked for the British and fought for them in distant areas leaving their own families back in Villages. The Sepoys were also given very low salaries.

Indian sepoy formed more than 87% of British troops in India. They were considered inferior to British soldiers. An Indian sepoy was paid less than a European sepoy of the same rank. Besides, an Indian sepoy could not rise to a rank higher than that of a Subedar. {5}

In 1856, the then Governor General Lord Canning (1856- 1862) who later on become the first viceroy of India after the passage of Govt. of India Act 1858 passed and issued an Act known as General Services Enlistment Act. According to which the Indian Sepoys were required to serve in distant areas even in British land across the sea. After the annexation of Awadh under the policy of Doctrine of lapse by Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856), the army of Nawab of Awadh was disbanded. The sepoy lost their means of livelihood as they were left with no other source of income for their families which made them bitter enemies of the British and in this way the sepoy rose to rebellion against the British thus, raising the banner of revolt in the form of sepoy Mutiny against the British.

IV. **Different Leaders From Different Regions Who Were Associated With The Mutiny Of 1857:**

1. **From Barrackpore:** 34th Native infantry Mangal pandey
2. **From Bareilly:** Khan Bahadur Khan
3. **From Bihar(Jagdishpur):** Amar singh, Kunwar singh (rightly known as Lion of Bihar)
4. **From Delhi:** General Bakht Khan, Bahadur Shah Zafar (The last Mughal Emperor)
5. **From Faizabad:** Maulvi Ahmadullah (The best soldiers among the rebels)
6. **From Jhansi:** Rani lakshmi Bai (Also known as Manu or Chhabelli)
7. **From Kanpur/Gwalior:** Nana Saheb (Actual name was Dondhu Alias Pant), Tantia Tope (Actual name was Ramchandra pandu Ranga)
8. **From Lucknow:** (The capital of Awadh) Begum HazratMahal and her son Birjish Qadar

V. Main Centres of the Mutiny: The Mutiny began at Meerut on 9th May 1857 and this day marked the beginning of the revolt of 1857. The Indian Sepoys fought heroically and slaughtered their British Officers and finally on 10th May 1857 they Marched towards Delhi. The main centres from where the leaders revolted are given below:-

1. **Delhi:-** The Indian Sepoys from different regions came out and joined with others Sepoys in Delhi and the whole city came under their control. Next morning i.e on 11th May 1857, they Proclaimed Bahadur Shah Zafar as the Emperor of Hindustan.
2. **Lucknow:-** At lucknow the Revolt was led by Begum Hazrat Mahal, the widow of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was the capital of Awadh from where she revolted. At last, The British forces defeated her and Begum Hazrat Mahal escaped to Nepal.
3. **Kanpur:-** Here the revolt was led by Nana Saheb. Also known as Dondhu Alias pant. He was the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. He led the revolt as he was refused to pension by the British Govt.
4. **Jhansi:-** Here the revolt was led by Rani Lakshmi Bai, the wife of Raja Gangadhar Rao. She was defending her territory which Sir Hugh Rose wanted to annex under the policy of Doctrine of Lapse. She fought bravely but unfortunately she died while fighting at kalpi near Jhansi. Sir Hugh Rose who defeated her paid high tribute to her while saying that, "Here lay the woman who was the only men among the rebels."

5. Bihar:- Here the revolt was led by Kunwar Singh. He was a leading Rajput zamindar of Jagdishpur (Bihar). He was rightly regarded as the "Lion of Bihar." He was even rated as the most brilliant military strategist of the Mutiny of 1857.

6. Faizabad:- The revolt was led by Maulvi Ahmadullah. He raised the banner of revolt at Faizabad. He was recognised even by the English, a man of great abilities of great courage and of stern determination and by far the best soldiers among rebels.

7. Bareilly:- At Bareilly, the revolt was led by Khan Bahadur Khan. He raised his voice against the British. At last, he was captured treacherously, thereafter tried and finally hanged.

VI. Suppression of the Mutiny of 1857 :

1. Delhi was suppressed by John Nicholson and Lieutenant Hudson on 20th September 1857.
2. Lucknow was suppressed by Henry Lawrence, Henry Havelock, Sir Colin Campbell and James Outram on 21st March 1858.
3. Kanpur was suppressed by Sir Colin Campbell and Sir Hugh Wheeler.
4. Jhansi was suppressed by Sir Hugh Rose on 17th June 1858.
5. Banaras was suppressed by Colonel James Neill.

VII. Causes liable for the failure of the Mutiny of 1857:

Following are the causes which were responsible for the failure of the Mutiny of 1857. These are:-

1. During the revolt the rebels were not united. At some places they fought against the British while at some other places, some rebels were in favour of British Govt. only because they had been benefitted by the British Govt.
2. People from all over India did not take part in the Mutiny. They thought that their participation would affect their families if they failed to crush British Govt. later on.
3. There was no common motive among the Indian people for crushing the rebellion.
4. The military weapons of Indian Sepoys were not superior in comparison with the British that's why the Sepoys had to face defeat at many places.
5. The treacherous people like the rich merchants, traders, big zamindars etc. provided the full assistance to the British Govt. to suppress the Mutiny.

Although the revolt was fairly widespread, a large part of the country remained unaffected by it. The revolt was mainly confined to the Doab region, Sind Rajputana, Kashmir, most parts of Punjab. The southern provinces did not take part in it. It failed to have the character of an all-India struggle. Important rulers like Scindhia, Holkar, Rana of Jodhpur and others did not support the rebels. {6}

VIII. Outcome of the mutiny of 1857:

The mutiny of 1857 was a great challenge to the British by the Indian Sepoys. This revolt ended the rule of East India Company and the power was completely transferred to the British crown according to an Act known as Govt. of India Act 1858.

The great uprising of 1857 was an important landmark in the history of modern India. The revolt marked the end of the East India Company's rule in India. India now came under the direct rule of the British Crown. This was announced by Lord Canning at a Durbar in Allahabad in a proclamation issued on 1 November 1858 in the name of the Queen. {7}

Queen Victoria now took the charge of whole administration in her hands. She promised to every Indian whether Rajas, Rulers or Nawabs also they could now regain their old influence and privileges. Besides this, all the civil as well as the military posts shall be given to them also if they would qualify to do so. The Govt. of India Act 1858 made the change in the designation of Governor General's office. Lord Canning (1856- 1862) was now the last Governor General and had become the 1st viceroy of India. The annexation policy of Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856) was abrogated. Rulers could now regain their old privileges. The adoption of a son by any ruler or Nawab was now conceded. This revolt finally ended after suppression by some British officers and after making some provisions in the Govt. of India Act 1858 which benefitted Indians the most.

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it is concluded that the Mutiny of 1857 posed a serious threat to the British Govt. Not only Sepoys but also the Rajas, Maharajas, Rulers of Princely states, Nawabs, peasants, zamindars and the common People also participated in the Mutiny because everyone has some own cause behind the bitterness against the British Govt.

The earlier attempt to introduce reform and interfere with existing customs and traditions was discontinued. The viceroy informed the Maharajas and the jagirdars (landlords) that in consideration of their loyalty to the British government...in the event of failure of anyone of them of direct heirs, recognise the privilege of adoption, according to the ancient customs of their respecting families. {8} Lord Canning (1856-1862) after becoming the first Viceroy of India was aware of the situation, chaos and confusion which was prevalent there that time. The Indians had already become the worst enemies of the British and had caused much more destruction everywhere. So he (Canning) thought of not interfering with the customs and traditions of the people which compel the British to face heavy loss. Lord Canning thus made it clear that the rulers could now adopt a son onwards and there would be no annexation of any territory from this time onwards. The Govt of India Act 1858 made some provisions in the interests of the Indians who revolted against the British during 1857. At last, it is not possible to say that whether it was a Sepoy Mutiny or people rebellion or any other view which had been put forwarded by different Historians because not only Sepoys but also different classes of the society including rulers, Nawabs, Maharajas, Peasants, zamindars whether Hindus or Muslims all of them were a part of this insurgency and having their own different causes indulge them to be a part of this Mutiny.

In a proclamation to the Princes Chiefs, and people of India, delivered on November 1858 Queen Victoria (1837-1901) pledged to 'respect the rights, dignity, and honour of native princes as our own'. And guarantee that the policy of annexing princely states has come to an end. {9}

Finally, the Mutiny came to an end after suppression and promises made by Queen Victoria.

Glossary:

1. **Awadh:** Region in Central North India.
2. **Begum:** A title given to the wives of Muslims princess.
3. **Raja:** King.
4. **Maharaja:** Great king.
5. **Nawab:** Equivalent to Raja.
6. **Sepoy:** Soldier

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