



# Beyond 1857 : Prior Movements of Independence in India

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## Abstract:

India's struggle for independence did not begin with the events of 1857. The desire for freedom and self-governance had been brewing for years, spurred by a combination of internal and external factors. The British attempts to impose their ideas of progress and modernity on Indian society were met with resistance, and the unease with British rule was evident long before the rebellion of 1857. This resistance was not limited to a single community; both Hindus and Muslims had their grievances against British rule, which eventually led to the proposal for a separate Muslim state as a solution to the conflicts between the two communities

**Keywords:** Revolt, War of Independence, Bengal Renaissance, Pre-1857 movements of independence, Muslim-Hindu conflicts etc.

## Introduction:

The events of 1857 are often referred to as the "First War of Independence" in India. However, it is essential to understand that the revolt of 1857 was not the first expression of Indian aspirations for independence. (India before Independence: Smaller struggles for freedom, 2018) Before 1857, several movements and uprisings laid the foundations for the eventual push for independence. These movements were driven by numerous factors such as socio-cultural, economic, and political grievances against British rule. These movements highlighted the deep-rooted desire among Indians for self-rule and freedom from foreign domination. These movements were influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including the impact of British policies on Indian society, the suppression of traditional institutions and practices, and the economic exploitation of the Indian subcontinent. The Bengal Renaissance, for example, symbolized a cultural awakening and intellectual resurgence that laid the groundwork for greater self-awareness and the questioning of British authority.

**Literature review:** Several scholars have highlighted the importance of recognizing the pre-1857 movements of independence in India. Buzan and Lawson argue that the Indian War of Independence, although not widely acknowledged, served as a precursor to later anti-colonial movements. However, they also emphasize that the rebellion of 1857 was not a unique event and can be compared to various earlier anti-imperial rebellions across time and space (Musgrave & Nexon, 2013).

According to these scholars, the Indian subcontinent had a history of resistance against imperial conquerors, and the desire for independence was not limited to the events of 1857. These movements encompassed various regions and communities, reflecting the widespread discontent with British rule. Some of the notable pre-1857 movements include the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which erupted over rumours about the use of animal fat. These movements also laid the foundation for the eventual proposal for a separate Muslim state as a solution to the Muslim-Hindu conflicts that arose during the struggle. The influence of these pre-1857

movements of independence in India resonated across social, cultural, and religious lines. The Bengal Renaissance, for instance, sparked a fervent wave of cultural and intellectual awakening, driving the resurgence of traditional Indian values and customs and kindling a sense of self-awareness and national pride. This cultural renaissance not only contributed to the broader movement for independence but also sowed the seeds of intellectual and ideological resistance against British colonialism.

### **Objective :**

1. To identify the contribution of pre 1857 movements that lead to the revolt of 1857 .
2. To know that revolt of 1857 was not the first revolt towards the independence.

**Methodology:** The data is drawn by adopting the Secondary data, is collected through the various Observation techniques and from various journals, and websites and research papers and through informal method.

Furthermore, the rise of conflicting interests between Hindus and Muslims in the region added another layer of complexity to the movements for independence. The proposition for a separate Muslim state as a means These movements had their roots in the discontentment of different sections of Indian society, including peasants, artisans, intellectuals, and religious leaders

The Muslim-Hindu conflicts also played a significant role in the pre-1857 movements of independence. The resistance against British rule in India was not limited to a single event or community. The discontent and desire for independence had been brewing for years, fueled by various socio-cultural, economic, and political grievances. While the 1857 rebellion is often hailed as the first major war of independence, it is crucial to recognize that it was preceded by numerous uprisings and movements that laid the groundwork for the eventual push for independence.

The impact of British policies on Indian society, the suppression of traditional institutions and practices, and the economic exploitation of the Indian subcontinent played a significant role in shaping the Indian desire for self-rule. The Bengal Renaissance Moreover, the simmering tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities was not solely a product of British policies, but the divide was exacerbated by British administrative measures. The proposal for a separate Muslim state to alleviate these tensions was not merely a response to the animosity between the two communities, but

The independence movement in India was not a sudden, spontaneous event that erupted in 1857. It had been simmering for decades, fueled by an amalgamation of internal and external factors. The oppressive policies of the British, aimed at imposing their version of progress on a society with its own rich history, culture, and traditions, created a deep-seated resentment among the Indian populace. The rebellion of 1857 was, in fact, the culmination of years of discontent and resistance. This desire for freedom and self-governance was not limited to any one community. Both Hindus and Muslims had their grievances against the British, which eventually led to the proposal for a separate Muslim state as a solution to the conflicts between the two communities.

### **Pre-1857 movements:**

One such significant movement was the Bengal Renaissance in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which saw Indian intellectuals and reformers advocating for social and religious reforms, as well as questioning British authority. They aimed to revive Indian cultural and intellectual traditions while rejecting the imposition of British ideals. This movement laid the groundwork for later movements that sought to challenge British rule and establish an independent India.

Another notable precursor to the 1857 rebellion was the Indian sepoys' revolt in Vellore in 1806, which predated The Indian Revolt of 1857 by about 50 years. The Vellore Mutiny occurred on July 10th, 1806, in present-day Tamil Nadu, India. Though short-lived, it was a brutal uprising that shook the British East India Company to its core. The English commanders had failed to consider the religious sensitivities of their Hindu and Muslim Indian sepoys. The Madras Army's Chief Commander, John Craddock, had issued orders prohibiting soldiers from wearing religious markings on their foreheads and mandated that they trim their

Mustaches and shave their beards. This upset the Hindu and Muslim soldiers who also had to wear new round hats instead of their traditional headgear. The sepoys suspected that they were being forcibly converted to Christianity. Craddock had acted against the advice of the military board, which had warned him not to make any changes to the military uniform without considering the Indian soldiers' sensibilities. Several sepoys who protested these new orders were taken to Fort St. George and punished severely. The Vellore Fort also held the wife and children of Tipu Sultan, who had been killed earlier. The event marked the first major mutiny by the Indian sepoys against the British East India Company. Indian sepoys in the East India Company this early instance of organized resistance against British rule signified the growing discontent among Indian soldiers who felt marginalized and disrespected by British officers. The repercussions of the Vellore mutiny reverberated through the Indian subcontinent and set the stage for future defiance against British authority.

Furthermore, the Wahabi Movement of the early 19th century also played a crucial role in setting the stage for India's struggle for independence. The Wahabi Movement, led by Syed Ahmed Barelvi, gained momentum in the early 19th century and sought to establish an Islamic state free from British influence. This (The ignored role of Wahabis in freedom struggle of Indian Independence ..., n.d) movement, with its emphasis on Islam the movement gained traction among Muslims and preached the ideals of unity, self-sufficiency, and independence from British rule. Delving into the roots of Indian independence movements unveils a complex tapestry of resistance and resilience that paved the way for the eventual push for freedom from British rule. The culmination of the Indian struggle for independence did not abruptly materialize in 1857; rather, it was a culmination of simmering discontent and resistance that had been brewing for decades.

The desire for independence was not confined to a singular community; it permeated through various segments of Indian society. Hindu and Muslim leaders, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, played pivotal roles in advocating for social and educational reforms, as well as promoting the idea of Indian self-governance.

These leaders highlighted the unity and shared aspirations of Hindus and Muslims for an independent India, debunking the narrative that the struggle for independence was solely driven by the events of 1857. The emergence of these movements and uprisings reflected a deep-seated yearning for autonomy and self-determination among the Indian populace. However, it was not solely internal factors that propelled these movements. The influence of external forces, combined with the imposition of British authority, further fueled the flames of discontent. The impact of imperial conquest and the subjugation of indigenous cultures cannot be overlooked in understanding the roots of India's quest for independence. The call for independence echoed in various parts of India through various movements and uprisings long before the events of 1857.

The Sanyasi Rebellion, carried out by the Sanyasis or ascetics in Bengal in the late 18th century, was another example of resistance against British rule. The Sanyasi Rebellion, famously known as the Monk Revolt, was a tumultuous uprising that shook Bengal during the late 18th century. Led by the fierce sanyasis and sadhus in the dense jungles of Murshidabad and Baikunthapur in Jalpaiguri, this revolt aimed to challenge and overthrow the oppressive British rule and exploitation. Pandit Bhabani Charan Pathak, a heroic leader, emerged as the face of this rebellion and inspired his compatriots to join the fight against the British forces. (The Historical Significance of the Sanyasi Rebellion in India, 2023) The Sanyasi Rebellion was a manifestation of the discontent and resistance among the sanyasis and sadhus against the oppressive British administration. These ascetics, belonging to the Hindu religious order, mobilized a considerable following and took up arms to confront the British authorities. This revolt became a symbol of resistance and set the stage for future anti-colonial movements in India. Sanyasis, deeply affected by the oppressive land revenue policies and loss of their traditional privileges, rose against the British East India Company's rule. This rebellion not only reflected the collective discontent among the rural population but also highlighted the widening gap between the British administration and the Indian populace. The roots of Indian struggles for independence run deep, far beyond the well-known events of 1857. These movements and uprisings were not merely spontaneous reactions; they were the culmination of years of discontent and resistance against British rule in India. The quest for Indian independence was a complex and multifaceted struggle that was not limited to a singular event or movement. The socio-cultural, economic, and political undercurrents of discontent shaped the landscape of resistance against British rule.

Alongside the Bengal Renaissance and the Vellore mutiny, there were other noteworthy movements and uprisings, each contributing to the evolving narrative of Indian independence. Additionally, regional movements against British rule, such as the Santhal Rebellion in 1855-1856.

The Santhals were a tribe that lived in the forests of Rajmahal hills. In 1832, the East India Company separated the Damin-i-Koh region from Jharkhand and gave it to the Santhals, promising to not interfere with their land. However, over time, the British raised the rent to an unaffordable rate, causing trouble for the Santhals. They had no choice but to revolt against the British and the Zamindars. The Santhal Rebellion was also fueled by their dependence on the barter system, which made it difficult for them to pay the zamindars with cash. As a result, they had to borrow money from the moneylenders at an exorbitant rate, which trapped them in a vicious cycle. The Santhal revolt, also known as the Hul revolt, began on June 30th, 1855. The revolt was led by prominent figures like Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav, and their two sisters, Phulo and Jhano. The Santhal people were deeply oppressed and anguished, leading them to engage in guerrilla warfare against the British rulers. They formed their own troops, which included farmers, villagers, and women, and militarized over 10000 Santhal people. The villagers set fire to storehouses and warehouses, and all communication lines were disrupted. The landlords supported the government, while the local people supported the Santhals fervently. Unfortunately, the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu were arrested, and the revolt was brutally suppressed. The Santhals were repressed, and the movement ended in 1856. Rebellion in Odisha. These pre-1857 movements, along with several others, highlight the resilience and determination of the Indian people to free themselves from foreign domination.

The Paika rebellion of Odisha is considered the beginning of a popular uprising against the British. The Paikas were traditional land-owning militia of Odisha, who rebelled against the British after losing their power and prestige following the East India Company's takeover of most of Odisha in 1803. The British responded by taking over the hereditary rent-free lands granted to the Paikas. The rebellion was led by Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mohapatra Bharamarbar Rai, the highest-ranking military general of King Khorda Mukund Dev II. The underlying causes of the rebellion included the rise in the price of salt, the abolition of the cowrie currency for payment of taxes, and an extortionist land revenue system.

The Bengal Renaissance of the late 18th and early 19th centuries stands as a testament to the intellectual and cultural resistance against British dominance. The movement, led by Indian intellectuals and reformers, sought to revive indigenous traditions. They laid the ideological groundwork for future movements that aimed to challenge British rule and establish a united India free from foreign domination. The desire for independence resonated deeply with the Indian populace, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. It was a collective yearning for autonomy and self-determination that had been fermenting for decades. The stirrings of resistance against British rule were not limited to the well-educated elite; they extended to the grassroots level, encompassing peasants, artisans, and tribal chiefs. The convergence of various societal factions in the struggle against colonial domination underscores the widespread nature of the independence movement.

The Bengal Renaissance, with its fervent advocacy for social and religious reforms, served as a powerful precursor to later movements. Indian intellectuals and reformers, disillusioned by the imposition of British ideals, staunchly upheld Indian cultural and intellectual traditions, sowing the seeds of resistance against British authority.

For instance, the Bengal Renaissance of the late 18th and early 19th centuries marked a crucial period where Indian intellectuals and reformers sought to revive Indian cultural and intellectual traditions while rejecting the imposition of British ideals. This movement sowed the seeds for later movements that aimed to challenge British rule and create an independent India.

This multifaceted resistance was not merely a result of spontaneous outbursts, as some historians have suggested. Instead, it embodied a significant degree of political consciousness. These prior movements of independence in India paved the way for the larger revolt of 1857. The dissent against British rule was not confined to the intellectual and elite circles. It extended to the broader population, including peasants, artisans, and tribal chiefs, who were profoundly affected by British policies and oppressive economic

measures. The revolts of these marginalized groups represented a significant resistance to colonial domination that laid the groundwork for the eventual larger uprising of 1857.

The suppression of these intermittent rebellions and the imposition of British authority following these revolts only fueled the undercurrents of discontent and desire for self-rule among the Indian populace. The historic continuum of opposition to the English East India Company created a fertile ground for the mass uprising. Furthermore, some regional movements and rebellions took place before 1857, which highlighted the widespread discontent and resistance against British rule.

These movements and uprisings were not isolated incidents, but rather a testament to the deep-seated discontent and longing for autonomy among the Indian populace. The Indian Rebellion of 1857, although a significant event in the struggle for independence, was just one culmination of these ongoing aspirations for self-rule.

The discontent stemmed from a myriad of factors, including the economic exploitation of Indian resources, the imposition of British laws and policies that disregarded Indian cultural norms, and the relegation of Indians to subordinate positions in their land. The Indian Renaissance in the late 18th and 19th centuries was fueled by thinkers and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The fight for independence was not limited to religious or intellectual leaders; it extended to the grassroots level, involving millions of peasants, artisans, and tribal chiefs who joined the resistance against colonial rule. These individuals, often marginalized and dispossessed by the British, found common cause in their struggle for autonomy and restoration of their pre-colonial socio-political structures. Their participation exemplified a significant political consciousness and organized resistance against imperial dominance, challenging the notion that these uprisings were merely spontaneous and uncoordinated disturbances.

Additionally, it is essential to recognize the interconnectedness and influence of global independence movements in shaping India's quest for freedom. Furthermore, the Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, can be seen as another significant milestone in the journey towards independence.

The emergence of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was a culmination of these preceding movements, reflecting the growing sentiment of Indian nationalism and the quest for independence from British rule. The inspiration drawn from the Irish struggle for independence decisively contributed to this awakening, underscoring the interconnectedness of anti-colonial movements across distinct parts of the country. As the 19th century unfolded, the desire for independence continued to simmer beneath the surface, finding expression in various forms. The impact of the Bengal Renaissance and the Vellore mutiny resonated throughout Indian society, contributing to a growing sentiment of dissent and resistance against British imperialism.

The echoes of these early movements reverberated well into the 20th century, shaping the landscape for the Indian struggle for independence. The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked a significant milestone in the quest for self-determination. The INC, initially advocating for socio-economic reforms, later galvanized its efforts towards the attainment of a multifaceted desire for independence in India, which was deeply tied to the complex interplay of historical, social, and political dynamics. The power struggles that unfolded before Independence were not just a clash between the British imperial forces and Indian nationalism; they were also deeply rooted in the economic ambitions of Indian business leaders who sought to shape the future direction of the nation.

Indian business leaders, while not the primary drivers of political change, aligned themselves with the Indian National Congress, under the leadership of figures like Gandhi and Nehru. This alliance proved pivotal in the evolution of the independence movement, as these leaders sought to nurture entrepreneurialism and business growth in India.

## Conclusion:

In conclusion, the struggle for Indian independence was not a sudden event but rather a culmination of various movements, uprisings, and intellectual developments that spanned over decades. From the Bengal Renaissance to the Indian sepoy's revolt in Vellore, these precursory events laid the foundation for the eventual push for independence in India. The desire for self-rule and freedom from foreign domination was deeply rooted in Indian society, cutting across religious and cultural lines. The subsequent formation of the

Indian National Congress and the All-India Home Rule League further exemplified the growing determination of the Indian people to assert their autonomy.

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