

The Revolt of 1857 was a major uprising in India during 1857-58 against the British regime. But it was unsuccessful and was superseded by the British East India Company, which ruled and acted as a sovereign power on behalf of the British Crown. It is regarded as one of the severe outbursts of resentment against the prevailing British regime in the form of the Indian revolt of 1857. The Revolt of 1857 event in Indian History was an important landmark. It is also known as the "first war of Independence".

The Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 is of steppingstone and is regarded as the primary outburst of resentment of simmering anger due to the prevailing discontent against the Britishers. Many revolts took place later such as battles of Plassey and Buxar, which are regarded as the landmark and decisive battles in shaping the modern historical regime.

The genesis of the revolt:

- The revolt was started by the soldiers and later spread across the country by peasants, artisans, and so on. The soldiers had worked for the East India Company and sacrificed their lives for the sake of others.
- People of different religions of India came together and fought united for one cause in this revolt.

Nature of the revolt

- Revolt of 1857 began as a revolt of the sepoys but eventually secured the participation of the masses.
- V.D. Savarkar called 1857 revolt as the First War of Indian Independence.
- Dr S.N. Sen describes it as "having begun as a fight for religion but ended as a war of independence."
- Dr R.C. Majumdar considers it as neither the first, nor national, nor a war of independence.
- As per some British historians, it was just a peasant sepoy mutiny.

Causes of the revolt:

- Exploitation by the Britishers: There were instances of continued exploitation of local land and imposition of Britisher's faith on Indians. Many times, it was forceful.
- People had severe discontent over this as they felt threatened to lose their faith and religious sentiments. This led to building up a sympathetic chord among the masses and collectively they rose to the common cause against the discontent British rule.

a. Economic Causes

- Highly unpopular revenue settlement
- Heavy taxation – causing peasants to go for a loan from moneylenders at usurious prices
- British policy discouraged Indian handicrafts which were not accompanied by the development of modern industries
- Excessive interference by Britishers: loss of status for Zamindars

b. Political Causes

- Subsidiary Alliance – of Lord Wellesley
- The doctrine of Lapse – of Lord Dalhousie
- Religious Disabilities Act, 1856 – change in religion would not debar child to inherit property

c. Administrative Causes

- Rampant corruption in the Company's administration – especially at a lower level (police, petty officials)
- No focus on Indian development

d. Socio-Religious Causes

- Britisher's attitude of superiority
- Activities of Christian missionaries
- The attempts at socio-religious reform such as the abolition of Sati, support to widow-remarriage and women's education
- To tax mosque and temple lands

e. Immediate Causes

- General Service Enlistment Act – decreed future recruits to serve anywhere even beyond seas.
- Inferior emoluments compared to his British counterpart.
- News of mixing of bone dust in wheat flours
- The cartridge of Enfield rifle was made of beef and pork fat

Influence of Contemporary Events

- First Afghan War (1838-42)
- Punjab Wars (1845-49)
- Crimean Wars (1854-56)
- Santhal rebellion (1855-57)

Important facts of the Revolt

- Meerut incident
- 19th Berhampur Native Infantry refused to use the newly introduced Enfield rifle and mutiny broke out in February 1857, later dissolved in Mar' 1857.
- The 34th Native Infantry's young sepoy, Mangal Pandey, fired at his unit's sergeant major at Barrackpore.
- The 7th Awadh Regiment was also disbanded
- Meerut rose to revolt May 10, they released their imprisoned comrades, killed their officers and moved to Delhi after sunset.
- Delhi- Centre of the Great Revolt

Leaders of the revolt

- At **Delhi**, the symbolic leadership was to the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, but the real command was led by **General Bakht Khan**.
- **Kanpur** rose under **Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, AZimullah Khan**. Sir Hugh Wheeler, commanding the station, surrendered. Nana Saheb declared himself the Peshwa and Bahadur Shah as Emperor of India
- **Begum Hazrat Mahal** took over the reign of **Lucknow** and Birjis Qadir, her son, was declared Nawab. Henry Lawrence, the British resident, was killed. The remaining Europeans were evacuated by Sir Colin Campbell, the new commander - in - chief.
- At **Bareilly**, **Khan Bahadur**, in **Bihar**, **Kunwar Singh**, Zamindar of Jagdishpur and **Maulvi Ahmadullah of Faizabad** led the revolt at their respective places.
- **Rani Laxmibai**, the most outstanding leader of the revolt, was driven out of **Jhansi** with the application of Lapse's Doctrine as Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General refused to allow her adopted son to succeed to the throne.

Suppression of the revolt

The Britishers considered this revolt as a serious threat to their regime and considerably changed their policies to overcome this rebellion, and they could succeed also.

- On September 20, 1857, the British captured Delhi. John Nicholson was the leader of the siege, succumbed to injuries later.
- The Revolt of 1857 lasted for more than a year and was suppressed by the middle of 1858. On July 8, 1858, fourteen months after the outbreak at Meerut, peace was finally proclaimed by Lord Canning.
- Bahadur Shah was taken the prisoner, exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862. Royal princes were publicly shot point-blank by Lieutenant Hudson. With the fall of Delhi, one by one all local revolts were suppressed.
- Sir Colin Campbell recaptured Kanpur and Lucknow.
- At Benaras, a rebellion was mercilessly suppressed, by Colonel Neil.

Causes of failure of the revolt

- Bahadur Shah has gone old and weak, so unable to lead the revolt.
- Limited territorial spread
- Most parts of India remained more or less unaffected.
- Many Big zamindars supported Britishers.
- Modern educated Indians viewed the revolt as backwards-looking
- The Indian soldiers were poorly equipped materially.
- The revolt was poorly organized with no central leadership or coordination.
- The revolt lacked a clear understanding of British rule and was poorly prepared.

The memories of the Revolt had a deep impression in the consciousness of both Britishers as well as Indian subjects. While Britishers labelled it merely as a “Sepoy Mutiny”, the nationalist elite glorified and regarded it as the ‘first war of Indian independence.