

# 12 WHEN PEOPLE REVOLT

HISTORY


**A**lmost constant uprisings from different parts of India against the British rule happened during the 18th and the first half of the 19th century. Peasants, dispossessed zamindars and tribal communities protested and fought against the exploitation and injustice of the British. The **revolt or revolution** of the 1857 was a major upheaval in the sepoys (Indian soldiers) and the Indian people at large. The British has termed it Sepoy Mutiny. When soldiers as a group disobey their officers in the army, it is called mutiny. Since the people from all sections of the society participated in it, to call it only a sepoy mutiny would be incorrect. However, some of the British writers such as J.B. Norton regard it as a mutiny as well as revolt of the people. Some historians call it a rebellion of the people. But literally, a revolution is different from a rebellion. A **revolution or revolt** is a struggle or fight by the common people for their freedom from the coercive rule. A **rebellion** may also be an organised attempt by a governor to declare him the independent ruler of a province turning it into a state, not necessarily by common people.

## Impact of Company Policies on People

People had been reacting and resisting the policies and actions of the East India Company that harmed their interests or go against their religious sentiments or social practices. These were rulers, landlords, sepoys, peasants, tribals, craftspersons and labourers as well.

### Nawabs and Rajas

Since the mid-eighteenth century, the British policies of Subsidiary Alliance and the Doctrine of Lapse had reduced the native kings and princes to mere subordinates. A male ruler of a small country or state was called a prince. A male ruler of relatively a big country or state was called a **king**. Their armed forces were disbanded and their revenue and territories were taken away by stages. The company was confident of its military powers. So, it turned down the pleas of Rani Lakshmi bai of Jhansi to recognise her adopted son as the heir to the kingdom after



the death of her husband. It also refused Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II to give his father's pension after the latter's death.

In 1849, Governor-General Dalhousie announced that after the death of Bahadur Shah Jafar, the family of the king would be shifted out of the Red Fort to another place in Delhi. In 1856, Governor-General Canning decided that after the death of Bahadur Shah Jafar, his descendants would be recognised just princes and not any of them as king.

Awadh was under Subsidiary alliance with the company since 1801. In 1856, Governor-General Dalhousie took over it under company rule in the name of proper administration.

### The Peasants and the Sepoys

The various land revenue policies introduced by the British made the lives of the peasants very miserable. They resented the high taxes and the rigid methods of revenue collection. They had to take loan from the moneylenders to pay the tax. They could hardly pay it back. Gradually, they lost their rights on land. Zamindars also had to pay high revenue on the lands they got cultivated by hired labour. They had to pay tributes to company officials also.

The pay and allowances of the sepoys in the company army were much less than the European soldiers. They were often humiliated by their British officers. The chances of promotion of Indians in the army were also very limited. They could not rise beyond the level of a subedar. In 1856, the company passed a new law which stated that every new recruit had to agree to serve overseas if required. Many people in those days believed that travelling overseas meant losing their religion and caste status. The British had forbidden wearing of marks such as tillk, turban or beard, which hurt religious sentiments of the Indians. Many sepoys were from peasant families. The anger of the peasants quickly spread among the sepoys.

### Responses to Reforms

To reform the Indian society, the British passed several laws such as stopping the practice of sati and legalising the remarriage of widows. English-language education was actively promoted. After 1830, the company allowed Christian missionaries to function freely and convert people to Christianity. Caste norms were disturbed when Indians belonging to different castes were placed together in the army, prisons and railway coaches. Indians viewed these measures as a threat to the established social order and were convinced that the British were all set to destroy their religion, social customs and their traditional way of life. There were, of course, some Indian reformers who wanted to change some of the social practices such as sati.

## Developments

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Gradually, a very large number of people began to believe that they

have a common enemy, the English or the British, and rise up against the enemy at the same time. Agents of some rulers were sent all over India to discover the temper of the sepoys. They also tried to persuade the sepoys to stand in revolt against their masters, the English. Meanwhile the government sent the new rifles and their new type of cartridges. These cartridges were smeared with grease and covered with caps which had to be bitten off before use. The sepoys got a report about some means or the other that this grease was made of the fat of cows and pigs. They refused to use them as these substances hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindus and Muslims respectively. The men from one regiment wrote to others in other regiments telling them about this.

### Outburst of the Revolt

The revolt originally started on March 29, 1857. A young sepoy named Mangal Pandey, stationed at Barrackpore near Calcutta, refused to use the newly introduced cartridges. Two British officers who tried to grapple with Mangal Pandey over the issue were shot dead by him. Mangal Pandey was finally hanged on April 8, 1857. Some days later, some sepoys of the Meerut regiment refused to do the army drill using the new cartridges as they were suspected of being coated with the fat of cows and pigs. On 9 May 1857, eighty-five sepoys were dismissed from service and sentenced to ten years in jail for disobeying their officers. On 10 May, 1857, the other sepoys organised themselves and released the imprisoned sepoys. They attacked and killed British officers and set fire to the buildings and properties of the British. They declared war on the firangis, that is, the evil foreigners. The term 'firangi' reflects an attitude of contempt.

The sepoys of Meerut started for Delhi. They rode all night of 10 May and reached Delhi in the early hours next morning. In the way they were joined by local people. As news of their arrival reached, the regiments in Delhi also revolted. All of them proclaimed Bahadur Shah Zafar as their leader at his palace in the Red Fort. They told him about the prophecies that the British rule would end on the century celebration by the British on 23 June, 1857. The too old emperor had to accept their declaration. He wrote letters to all chiefs and rulers of the country to come forward and organise a **confederacy** of Indian states to fight the British. This single step taken by Bhadur Shah Zafar had great implications.

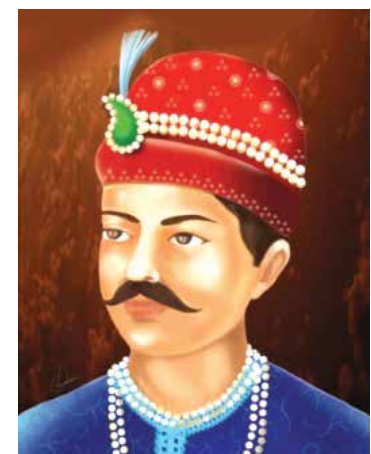
It took a week to travel the news. Sepoys of regiment after regiment of north India took off to join other troops at nodal points like Delhi, Kanpur and Lucknow. After then the people of the towns and villages also rose up in revolt and rallied around local leaders, zamindars and chiefs who were prepared to establish their authority and fight the British. Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the late Peshwa Baji Rao lived near Kanpur. He gathered armed forces and expelled the British soldiers from Kanpur city. He proclaimed himself the Peshwa. In Lucknow, the son



Mangal Pandey

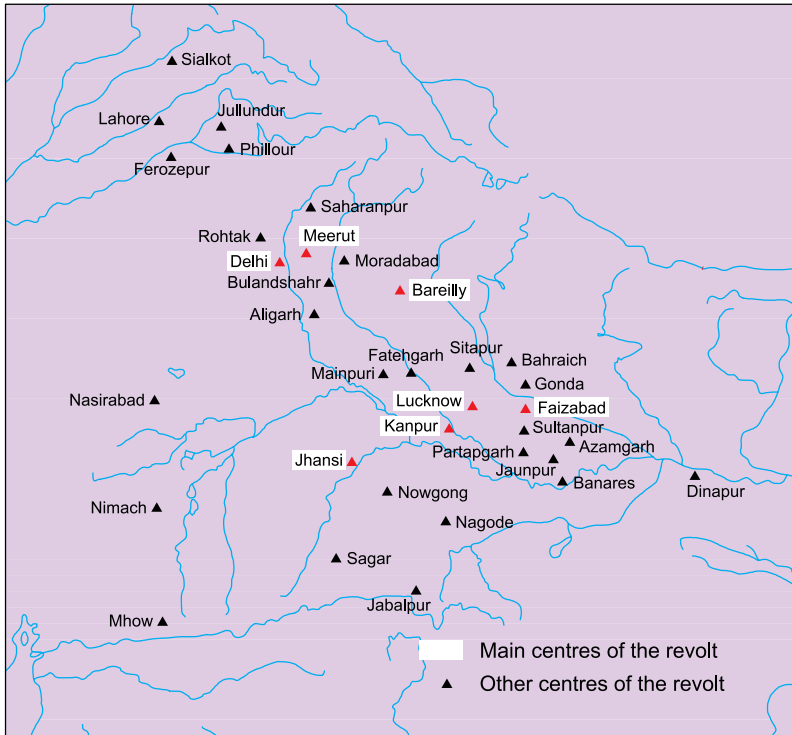


Sepoys and peasants gather for the revolt



Tantia Toppe

of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was proclaimed the new Nawab of Awadh (Oudh). His mother Begum Hazrat Mahal took an active part in organising the uprising against the British. In Jhansi, the sepoys revolted and killed the British army officers. Rani Laxmibai, the widow of the late Raja Gangadhar Rao was proclaimed the ruler of the state. She fought the British along with Tantia Tope, the general of Nana Saheb. All these rulers acknowledged the suzerainty of Bahadur Shah Jafar.



The British were defeated in a number of battles. The revolutionary forces outnumbered them. The news of the defeat of the British further convinced the rest of the people to join the revolt. Many new leaders came up. For example, Ahmadullah Shah, a maulvi from Faizabad raised a huge force of supporters and marched to Lucknow to fight the British. Bakht Khan, a soldier from Bareilly took charge of a large force of fighters who came to Delhi. He became a key military leader of the rebellion. On the evening of 3 July 1857, over 3000 revolutionaries came from Bareilly attacked the British cavalry posts in Delhi (Fig. 14.5). The battle continued all through the night. In Bihar, an old zamindar, Kunwar Singh battled with the British for many months.

### The Company Fights Back



*The battle in the cavalry Lines in Delhi*

The company sent telegrams and messengers to England. It brought forces, arms and ammunitions from England. The British forces, initially found it difficult to break through the heavy fortification in Delhi. On 3 September 1857 reinforcements arrived : a 7-mile long siege train comprising cartloads of canons and ammunition pulled by elephants (Fig. 14.6).

Delhi was recaptured from the revolutionary forces on 20 September 1857. The last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah (Fig. 14.7) was tried in court and sentenced to life imprisonment. His sons were shot dead before his eyes. He and his wife Begum Zinat Mahal were sent to prison in Rangoon in present day Myanmar in October 1858. He died in the Rangoon jail in November 1862 at the age of 87.

This is the content of the telegram sent by Lieutenant colonel Tytler to his commander-in-chief :

“Our men are cowed by the numbers opposed to them and the endless fighting. Every village is held against us, the zamindars have risen to oppose us.”



People continued to resist and battle. The British had to fight for two years to suppress the massive forces of the popular revolution. Lucknow was taken in March 1858 with the help of Gorkha soldiers. Rani Lakshmbai died fighting valiantly in June 1858. Tantia Tope continued to fight a guerilla war from central India. He was captured, tried and killed in April 1859. The British used utmost brutality and ruthlessness to suppress the revolt. They burnt down villages and resorted to public hanging or blowing people off at the mouth of the canons. The British announced the safety of the revolutionaries submitting to the British. Nevertheless, hundreds of sepoys, revolutionaries, nawabs and rajas were tried and hanged. The British had regained control of the country by the end of 1859.

### Why did the Revolt Failed ?

The revolt was not well organised, if not unorganised. The Indian revolutionaries did not have the network of trained soldiers and sophisticated weapons. There was a lack of foresight that the British could bring enforcement from the Britain in steamships within a month. There was no centralised planning or coordinated plans. The revolt remained limited to only northern and parts of central India. The other regions remained completely unaffected by it. Many sections of the Indian populations were very friendly with the British such as Rajput princes, Nizam of Hyderabad, ruling chief of Patiala. They stayed away from the Revolt.



*The siege train reaches Delhi*


### Aftermath

The British Parliament felt that they could not carry on ruling India with the same policies anymore. First of all the British government accepted direct responsibility for ruling India. The powers of the East India Company were transferred to the British crown in order to ensure a more responsible management. The Governor-General of India was given the title of Viceroy, that is, a personal representative of the crown (queen Victoria at that time). The other important changes were the following :

1. All ruling chiefs were assured that no further annexation would be made under the subsidiary alliance or doctrine of lapse. It promised to safeguard the interests of 560 odd princes of India.
2. The crown promised not to interfere in the social and religious practices of the people.
3. Policies were made to protect landlords and zamindars and give them security of rights over their lands.
4. The British believed that the Muslims were responsible for the revolt in a big way. So, the land and property of Muslims was confiscated on a large scale and they were treated with suspicion and hostility.



*Queen Victoria*

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5. From now the proportion of European soldiers in the army would be increased and Indian soldiers decreased. In future, more soldiers would be recruited from among the Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans instead of soldiers from Awadh, Bihar, central India and south India.

The revolt of 1857 was first step in emergence of a national movement. It united, though in a limited sense, the people of India for a common cause. It proved to be a major source of inspiration and raised patriotic sentiments among the people. It was the first revolt of its kind where people considered them as brothers irrespective of caste or religion against the British.

#### In Other Parts of the World

#### Taiping Rebellion

In 1850, thousands of labouring poor people were led by Hong Xiuquan to fight for the establishment of the Heavenly kingdom of Great Peace. The rebels of Taiping wanted to establish a kingdom where no one held any private property, where there was no difference between social classes and between men and women, where consumption of opium, tobacco, alcohol and activities like gambling, prostitution and slavery were prohibited.

The Taiping Rebellion could be suppressed only by the mid 1860s with the help of the British and French armed forces operating in China.



#### Key Words

- » Sepoy : an Indian soldier in British army.
- » Firangi : evil foreigner.
- » Mutiny : when soldiers as a group disobey their officers in the army; revolt by soldiers.
- » Prince : male ruler of a small country or state.
- » Enforcement : soldiers, arms and ammunitions .
- » Revolt or Revolution : a struggle or fight by the common people for their freedom from the coercive rule.
- » Rebellion : an organised attempt to change the government or leader of a country using violence, not necessarily by common people.
- » Cartridge : sealed unit containing bullets.

## SUMMARY

- ▶ A revolution or revolt is a struggle or fight by the common people for their freedom from the coercive rule.
- ▶ People had been reacting and resisting the policies and actions of the East India Company that harmed their interests or go against their religious sentiments or social practices.
- ▶ Since the mid-eighteenth century, the British policies of subsidiary alliance had reduced the native kings and princes to mere subordinates.
- ▶ High rates and rigid methods of revenue collection had made the lives of the peasants miserable.
- ▶ The sepoys in the company army were paid much less than the European soldiers. They were often humiliated by their British officers.

- ▶ The new recruits had to agree to serve overseas if required. Many people in those days believed that travelling overseas meant losing their religion and caste status.
- ▶ To reform the Indian society, the British passed several laws such as stopping the practice of sati and legalising the remarriage of widows.
- ▶ Caste norms were disturbed when Indians belonging to different castes were placed together in the army, prisons and railway coaches.

## Exercise Time

### A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. \_\_\_\_\_ was proclaimed the leader of the revolt.  
a. Tantia Tope      b. Begum Hazrat Mahal      c. Mangal Pandey      d. Bahadur Shah Zafar
2. Governor-General \_\_\_\_\_ took over Awadh under company rule.  
a. Dalhousie      b. Canning      c. Manipur      d. East India
3. On \_\_\_\_\_ 1857 the sepoys released the imprisoned sepoys.  
a. 6 May      b. 9 May      c. 10 May      d. 15 May
4. Bahadur Shah Zafar wrote to Indian rulers to make a \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. Prince      b. confederacy      c. Firangi      d. an empire
5. Bakht Khan was a \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. King      b. maulvi      c. Prince      d. soldier

### B. Fill in the blanks :

1. The Indian sepoys could not rise beyond the level of \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Under Subsidiary alliance the armed forces of the rulers were \_\_\_\_\_.
3. The British stopped the practice of sati and legalised the remarriage of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Bahadur Shah Jafar wrote to all rulers to organise a \_\_\_\_\_ of Indian states.
5. The East India Company brought forces, arms and ammunitions from \_\_\_\_\_.

### C. Match the Following :

- |                    |                                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. 10 May 1857     | a. The British in India           |
| 2. Firangi         | b. Barrackpore                    |
| 3. Victoria        | c. Revolution started from Meerut |
| 4. Mangal Pandey   | d. Jhansi                         |
| 5. Rani Lakshmibai | e. The Queen of Great Britain     |

### D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :

1. Adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II was refused his father's pension.
2. The Revolt of 1857 spread throughout India.
3. Some Indian reformers wanted to change some of the social practices.
4. A 7-mile long siege train arrived Delhi on 3 September 1857.
5. The English East India Company continued to rule over India after 1857.



**E. Define the terms :**

1. Mutiny
2. Revolution
3. Rebellion
4. Enforcements

**F. Answer in one word or one phrase :**

1. What was the immediate cause of the Revolt of 1857 ?
2. Who was the British ruler at the time of the Revolt of 1857 ?
3. Who led the revolt at Jhansi ?
4. From where the East India Company brought enforcements ?
5. Where was Bahadur Shah Jafar sent in imprisonment ?

**G. Answer these question briefly :**

1. What was the demand of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi that was refused by the British ?
2. What were the causes of discontent among the Indian sepoy s ?
3. What objections did the sepoy s have to the new cartridges that they were asked to use ?
4. How do unorganized rebellions originate ?
5. What was the immediate cause of the outbreak of the revolt of 1857 ?

**H. Answer these questions in detail :**

1. What was the impact of policies of East India Company on people in the nineteenth century ?
2. Describe the outburst of the Revolt of 1857.
3. How did the East India Company regain control of the country, India ?
4. In what ways did the British change their policies as a result of the revolt of 1857 ?

## PROJECT WORK

- Find out stories and songs remembered by people in your area about San Sattavan Ki Ladaai (the war of the year 1857).