

## Revolt of 1857

### Background

- The Indian Mutiny of 1857 was a widespread but unsuccessful rebellion against the rule of British East India Company in India which functioned as a sovereign power on behalf of the British crown.
- It was the first expression of organised resistance against the British East India Company
- It began as a revolt of the sepoys of the British East India Company's army but eventually secured the participation of the masses.
- The revolt is known by several names: the Sepoy Mutiny (by the British Historians), the Indian Mutiny, the Great Rebellion (by the Indian Historians), the Revolt of 1857, the Indian Insurrection, and the First War of Independence (by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar).

### Causes of the Revolt

#### Political Cause

- British policy of expansion: The political causes of the revolt were the British policy of expansion through the Doctrine of Lapse and direct annexation.
- A large number of Indian rulers and chiefs were dislodged, thus arousing fear in the minds of other ruling families who apprehended a similar fate.
- 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.
- The annexation of Awadh by Lord Dalhousie on the pretext of maladministration left thousands of nobles, officials, retainers and soldiers jobless. This measure converted Awadh, a loyal state, into a hotbed of discontent and intrigue.

#### Doctrine of lapse

- The notable British technique called the Doctrine of Lapse was first perpetrated by Lord Dalhousie in the late 1840s.

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- It involved the British prohibiting a Hindu ruler without a natural heir from adopting a successor and, after the ruler died or abdicated, annexing his land.
- To those problems added the growing discontent of the Brahmans, many of whom had been dispossessed of their revenues or had lost lucrative positions.

### **Social and Religious Cause**

- The rapidly spreading Western Civilisation in India was alarming concerns all over the country.
- An act in 1850 changed the Hindu law of inheritance enabling a Hindu who had converted into Christianity to inherit his ancestral properties.
- The people were convinced that the Government was planning to convert Indians to Christianity.
- The abolition of practices like sati and female infanticide, and the legislation legalizing widow remarriage, were believed as threats to the established social structure.
- Introducing western methods of education was directly challenging the orthodoxy for Hindus as well as Muslims
- Even the introduction of the railways and telegraph was viewed with suspicion.

### **Economic Cause**

- In rural areas, peasants and zamindars were infuriated by 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.
- Large numbers of sepoys belonged to the peasantry class and had family ties in villages, so the grievances of the peasants also affected them.
- After the Industrial Revolution in England, there was an influx of British manufactured goods into India, which ruined industries, particularly the textile industry of India.
- Indian handicraft industries had to compete with cheap machine-made goods from Britain.

### Military Causes

- The Revolt of 1857 began as a sepoy mutiny
- Indian sepoys formed more than 87% of the British troops in India but were considered inferior to British soldiers.
- An Indian sepoy was paid less than a European sepoy of the same rank.
- They were required to serve in areas far away from their homes.
- In 1856 Lord Canning issued the General Services Enlistment Act which required that the sepoys must be ready to serve even in British land across the sea.

### Immediate Cause

- The Revolt of 1857 eventually broke out over the incident of greased cartridges.  
A rumour spread that the cartridges of the new enfield rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs.
- Before loading these rifles the sepoys had to bite off the paper on the cartridges.
- Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys refused to use them.
- Lord Canning tried to make amends for the error and the offending cartridges were withdrawn but the damage had already been done. There was unrest in several places.
- In March 1857, Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in Barrackpore, had refused to use the cartridge and attacked his senior officers. He was hanged to death on 8<sup>th</sup> April.
- On 9<sup>th</sup> May, 85 soldiers in Meerut refused to use the new rifle and were sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

### Centres of the Revolt

- The revolt spread over the entire area from the neighbourhood of Patna to the borders of Rajasthan. The main centres of revolt in these regions namely Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi, Gwalior and Arrah in Bihar. Lucknow: it was the capital of Awadh. Begum Hazrat Mahal, one of the begums of the ex-king of Awadh, took up the leadership of the revolt.
- Kanpur: the revolt was led by Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. He joined the revolt primarily because he was deprived of his pension by the British.

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- The victory was short-lived. Kanpur was recaptured by the British after fresh reinforcements arrived.
- The revolt was suppressed with terrible vengeance.
- Nana Saheb escaped but his brilliant commander Tantia Tope continued the struggle.
- Tantia Tope was finally defeated, arrested and hanged.
- Jhansi: the twenty-two-year-old Rani Lakshmi Bai led the rebels when the British refused to accept the claim of her adopted son to the throne of Jhansi.  
She fought gallantly against the British forces but was ultimately defeated by the English.
- Gwalior: After Rani Lakshmi Bai escaped, she was joined by Tantia Tope and together they marched to Gwalior and captured it. Fierce fighting followed where the Rani of Jhansi fought like a tigress but died, fighting to the very end.
- Gwalior was recaptured by the British.
- Bihar: the revolt was led by Kunwar Singh who belonged to a royal house of Jagdispur, Bihar.

**Suppression and the Revolt**

Places of Revolt	Indian Leaders	British Officials who suppressed the revolt
Delhi	Bahadur Shah II	John Nicholson
Lucknow	Begum Hazrat Mahal	Henry Lawrence
Kanpur	Nana Saheb	Sir Colin Campbell
Jhansi & Gwalior	Lakshmi Bai & Tantia Tope	General Hugh Rose
Bareilly	Khan Bahadur Khan	Sir Colin Campbell
Allahabad and Banaras	Maulvi Liyakat Ali	Colonel Ocell
Bihar	Kunwar Singh	William Taylor

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- The Revolt of 1857 lasted for more than a year. It 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.

