



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Revolt Of 1857: Causes, Course, And Consequences

1. Twinkle DebBarma

Guest Lecturer, Bir Bikram Memorial College
Department of Defence & Strategic Studies
College Tilla, Agartala, West Tripura-799004

2. Sabina Hrangkhawl

Guest Lecturer, Bir Bikram Memorial College
Department of History
College Tilla, Agartala, West Tripura-799004

Abstract

The Revolt of 1857 was a landmark event in Indian history, often regarded as the First War of Independence. It represented the first large-scale and organized attempt by Indians to overthrow British colonial rule. The rebellion, initiated by sepoys of the British East India Company's army, quickly escalated into a mass uprising involving various sections of Indian society. This paper explores the deep-rooted causes of the revolt, including political annexations, economic exploitation, social and religious disruptions, and military grievances. The paper also provides an in-depth analysis of the key events that unfolded during the rebellion, highlighting the contributions of leaders such as Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib, and Bahadur Shah II. Additionally, it examines the reasons behind the failure of the uprising, including the lack of centralized leadership and limited coordination among rebels. The consequences of the revolt were far-reaching, leading to the dissolution of the East India Company, the end of the Mughal Empire, and the direct control of India by the British Crown. The revolt also ignited nationalist sentiments, setting the stage for future freedom movements. By analyzing the Revolt of 1857, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its significance in the broader context of India's struggle for independence.

Keywords: Revolt of 1857, First War of Independence, British colonial rule, East India Company, Indian nationalism, sepoy mutiny, military grievances, political annexations, economic exploitation, Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah II.

I.Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 was not just a spontaneous uprising but a culmination of years of growing discontent against British rule. It was the first large-scale resistance by Indians against foreign domination and is often regarded as a precursor to India's later independence movement. While it started as a military rebellion among the sepoys of the British East India Company's army, it quickly gained traction among civilians, including peasants, landlords, and deposed rulers who had grievances against colonial policies.

British expansionist policies, coupled with oppressive economic measures, led to widespread resentment. The Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie, played a crucial role in fueling the rebellion, as it deprived many Indian rulers of their rightful claims to their thrones. Similarly, high taxation and exploitative land revenue systems left peasants impoverished, making them willing participants in the struggle. Furthermore, the British administration's disregard for Indian customs and religious sentiments-exemplified by the introduction of the greased cartridge, rumoured to be coated with cow and pig fat-angered both Hindu and Muslim soldiers, serving as an immediate trigger for the revolt.

The spread of the uprising was rapid, covering major regions such as Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, and central India. Leaders like Rani Lakshmibai, Tatya Tope, Nana Sahib, and Bahadur Shah II played pivotal roles in organizing resistance against the British. Despite fierce battles and initial successes, the movement was eventually suppressed due to superior British military strategies, lack of coordination among Indian leaders, and the absence of a unified national identity at the time.

The consequences of the revolt were profound. Although it failed to achieve its objective of ending British rule, it marked a significant shift in colonial governance. The British Crown took direct control of India, dissolving the East India Company's rule. Military and administrative policies were revised to prevent future uprisings, while Indian nationalism gained momentum, laying the groundwork for the independence struggle in the 20th century.

This paper delves into the causes, key events, and consequences of the Revolt of 1857, offering a detailed analysis of its role in shaping India's colonial history and nationalist movements.

II. Causes of the Revolt

The rebellion was the result of multiple factors, including political, economic, social, and military grievances:

1. **Political Causes:** The British policy of annexation, particularly through the Doctrine of Lapse introduced by Lord Dalhousie, caused widespread resentment among Indian rulers. Under this policy, if a ruler died without a direct male heir, his kingdom was annexed by the British. Several princely states, including Jhansi, Satara, and Nagpur, lost their sovereignty. The annexation of Awadh in 1856, citing administrative mismanagement, deeply angered the ruling class and common people, who had long been loyal to the Nawab of Awadh. This policy was seen as an attack on Indian sovereignty and a violation of traditional succession rights, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among the native rulers.
2. **Economic Causes:** British economic policies devastated Indian agriculture, industry, and trade. The introduction of exploitative land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement (1793) and the Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems placed an excessive tax burden on peasants, forcing them into debt and destitution. Many farmers lost their lands due to high taxation, leading to widespread agrarian distress. Traditional artisans and craftsmen also suffered due to the influx of British-manufactured goods, particularly textiles, which led to the decline of indigenous industries. The British also monopolized trade, suppressing local businesses and creating an economic downturn. As a result, the Indian population faced extreme poverty and unemployment, which contributed to growing resentment and active participation in the revolt.
3. **Social and Religious Causes:** British policies disrupted traditional Indian society. Reforms such as the abolition of sati (1829) and the legalization of widow remarriage (1856), although progressive, were perceived as attempts to interfere in Indian customs and traditions. The British educational policies, which emphasized English and Western curricula over traditional Indian learning, alienated many conservative sections of society. Furthermore, Christian missionary activities and forced conversions raised fears that the British sought to undermine Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. The introduction of the General Services Enlistment Act of 1856, which required Indian sepoy to serve overseas, offended orthodox Hindus who believed that crossing the seas would lead to the loss

of their caste status. These factors fueled anxieties and discontent among various sections of Indian society.

4. **Military Causes:** Indian sepoys constituted a significant portion of the British army, but they faced severe discrimination in terms of pay, promotions, and living conditions compared to their British counterparts. Indian soldiers were often paid less and denied higher ranks, despite their loyalty and service. The immediate trigger for the revolt was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle, which required soldiers to bite off greased cartridges rumoured to be coated with cow and pig fat. This enraged Hindu and Muslim soldiers, as it violated their religious beliefs. When sepoys at Meerut refused to use the cartridges and were harshly punished, it led to open rebellion on May 10, 1857, marking the beginning of the uprising. The discontent within the army, combined with existing grievances, fueled large-scale mutinies across different military units

III. Course of the Revolt

The Revolt of 1857 began with the mutiny of sepoys at Meerut on May 10, 1857. The immediate cause was the use of greased cartridges, which violated religious sentiments. When 85 sepoys refused to use the cartridges, they were court-martialled and harshly punished. This act of defiance led to an open rebellion in which the sepoys freed their comrades, killed British officers, and marched towards Delhi.

1. **Capture of Delhi:** The rebels reached Delhi on May 11, 1857, and proclaimed the aging Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, as their leader. Delhi became the focal point of the rebellion. However, the Mughal emperor was merely a symbolic figurehead, with real leadership coming from military leaders and regional rulers. The British, recognizing Delhi's strategic importance, launched a counteroffensive. After prolonged fighting, Delhi fell to the British in September 1857, and Bahadur Shah II was captured and later exiled to Rangoon.
2. **Kanpur and Nana Sahib's Resistance:** Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the deposed Peshwa Baji Rao II, led the rebellion in Kanpur. He declared himself the Peshwa and sought to restore Maratha rule. His forces initially defeated the British and took control of Kanpur. However, the British recaptured the city in July 1857 after a prolonged siege. The infamous Bibighar Massacre, where British women and children were killed, led to severe British reprisals against the rebels.
3. **Lucknow and Begum Hazrat Mahal:** The uprising in Awadh was led by Begum Hazrat Mahal, the wife of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. She declared her son as the Nawab of Awadh and led a strong resistance. The British forces, led by Sir Colin Campbell, launched multiple offensives and finally retook Lucknow in March 1858 after months of intense fighting.
4. **Jhansi and Rani Lakshmi Bai's Heroic Stand:** Rani Lakshmibai, one of the most prominent figures of the revolt, led the resistance in Jhansi. She formed an alliance with Tatya Tope and fought fiercely against the British. In March 1858, British forces attacked Jhansi, and despite valiant resistance, the city fell. Rani Lakshmibai escaped and joined Tatya Tope. She later died in battle in June 1858 while fighting in Gwalior.
5. **Tatya Tope's Guerrilla Warfare:** Tatya Tope, one of Nana Sahib's key commanders, continued to resist the British even after the fall of major rebel strongholds. He adopted guerrilla warfare tactics, moving through central India and rallying local support. However, he was eventually captured and executed in April 1859.
6. **The Fall of Gwalior:** Gwalior was one of the last strongholds of the rebels. With the help of Rani Lakshmibai and Tatya Tope, it was captured by rebel forces. However, the British launched a final assault and recaptured Gwalior in June 1858, marking the end of organized resistance.

IV. Consequences of the Revolt

The Revolt of 1857 had profound and lasting consequences for India and British rule. The failure of the uprising resulted in significant political, administrative, military, social, and economic changes that reshaped India's future.

1. **End of the East India Company's Rule:** One of the most immediate and crucial outcomes of the revolt was the abolition of the British East India Company's rule in India. The Government of India Act 1858 transferred control directly to the British Crown. This shift marked the beginning of the British Raj, with Queen Victoria assuming the title of Empress of India in 1877. The governance of India was placed under a newly created office known as the Secretary of State for India, who was responsible for overseeing Indian affairs from London.
2. **Establishment of Direct British Rule:** The British government took direct control over India, bringing an end to the system of administration through the East India Company. The governance was restructured, and policies were reformed to ensure a stronger grip over the Indian subcontinent. This period saw an increased role of the British Parliament in Indian affairs and the introduction of policies aimed at preventing future rebellions.
3. **End of the Mughal Empire:** The capture of Delhi and the exile of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, marked the formal end of the Mughal dynasty. The Mughal Empire had already been weakened by British expansion, but the revolt led to its complete dissolution. Bahadur Shah II was exiled to Rangoon (modern-day Yangon, Myanmar), and the Mughal lineage ceased to have any political influence in India.
4. **Military Reforms:** The British identified the Indian army as a major source of the revolt and implemented widespread reforms to prevent future uprisings. The proportion of British soldiers in the army was increased compared to Indian sepoy, and Indian regiments were reorganized to minimize the possibility of collective rebellion. The British also adopted a policy of recruiting Indian soldiers from regions and communities considered more loyal, such as Punjabis and Gurkhas, while reducing the recruitment of those from regions that had actively participated in the revolt.
5. **Reorganization of Administration:** British policies underwent significant changes to ensure that Indian elites remained loyal to the empire. The British stopped the aggressive application of the Doctrine of Lapse, and Indian princes were assured that their kingdoms would not be annexed arbitrarily. This was an attempt to maintain stability and cooperation among princely states.
6. **Increased Racial Discrimination:** The British attitude toward Indians hardened after the revolt. A deep sense of racial superiority was reinforced, and policies were introduced to maintain strict segregation between the British and the Indians. Indians were barred from holding higher administrative and military positions, and British officials maintained a more autocratic approach in governance.
7. **Economic Exploitation Intensifies:** After the revolt, British economic policies became even more exploitative. Heavy taxation continued, and India's economic structure was increasingly designed to serve British industrial interests. The Indian economy was further subjected to deindustrialization, with local industries declining in favor of British-manufactured goods. Agricultural policies also changed, leading to widespread rural distress and poverty.
8. **Growth of Indian Nationalism:** Although the revolt was ultimately unsuccessful, it played a crucial role in shaping Indian nationalism. The shared experience of oppression and resistance created a sense of unity among Indians. The events of 1857 inspired later nationalist leaders and movements, including the Indian National Congress, which was founded in 1885 to demand reforms and, eventually, independence from British rule.

9. **Impact on Social and Religious Policies:** The British adopted a more cautious approach towards interfering in Indian social and religious matters. Prior to the revolt, British policies were perceived as undermining Indian traditions, such as the introduction of Western education and the suppression of certain social customs. After 1857, the British became more careful in implementing reforms to avoid provoking further unrest.
10. **Legal and Infrastructure Developments:** The British government introduced new legal frameworks to tighten administrative control. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) and other legal statutes were developed to standardize the judicial system. Additionally, large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways and telegraphs, were expanded to improve communication and facilitate the movement of British troops across India in case of future disturbances.

V. Conclusion

The Revolt of 1857 was a defining moment in Indian history, marking the first widespread resistance against British rule. Though it ultimately failed in its immediate objective, it significantly altered the colonial landscape. The shift from Company rule to direct governance by the British Crown led to significant administrative, military, and political changes. More importantly, the revolt planted the seeds of Indian nationalism, uniting people across different regions and communities against foreign oppression. The lessons learned from 1857 shaped later independence movements, making it a crucial chapter in India's freedom struggle.

References

1. Metcalf, T. R. (1990). *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857-1870*. Princeton University Press.
2. Majumdar, R. C. (1957). *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*. Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
3. Stokes, E. (1986). *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857*. Oxford University Press.
4. Mukherjee, S. (2002). *Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres*. Anthem Press.
5. Dalrymple, W. (2006). *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
6. Mishra, B. (2016). *The Indian Revolt of 1857 and Its Impact on British Colonial Policies*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Taylor, P. J. O. (1997). *What Really Happened During the Mutiny: A Day-by-Day Account of the Major Events of 1857-1859 in India*. Oxford University Press.
8. Sen, S. N. (1957). *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India.
9. Ward, A. (2009). *1857: The Real Story of the Great Uprising*. Penguin India.
10. Chaudhuri, K. N. (1983). *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge University Press.