

Chapter 11

Rebels and the Raj The Revolt of 1857 and its Representations

- Since the mid-18th century, Nawabs and Rajas had gradually lost their power and authority. Their freedom was curtailed, their armed forces were disbanded and their revenues and territories were taken away.
- Many ruling families such as Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi tried to negotiate with the company to protect their interest but they did not get success.
- Now the company began to plan to bring an end to the Mughal Dynasty. To make this plan successful the company took several measures.
- The name of the Mughal king was removed from the coins minted by the Company.
- In 1849, it was announced that after the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the family of the king would be shifted out of the Red Fort and given another place in Delhi to reside in.
- In 1856, the Company decided that Bahadur Shah Zafar would be the last Mughal king, and after his death his descendants would be called princes.
- In the countryside peasants and zamindars resented the high taxes and the rigid methods of revenue collection.
- The Indian sepoy were unhappy about their pay, allowances and condition of service. Some of the Company's rules even violated their religious sentiments. Thus, everywhere there spread discontentment.
- The responses to the reforms brought in the Indian society by the British were also not positive, although some reforms were essential.
- The Company passed laws to stop the practice of sati.
- English-language education was promoted.
- In 1850, a new law was passed to make conversion to Christianity easier.
- Some Indians thought that the British were destroying their religion and their social customs while some wanted to change existing social practices.
- By and by the people began to view the British as their common enemy and therefore they rose up against this enemy at the same time.
- In May, 1857 a massive rebellion started that threatened the company's very existence in India.
- Sepoy mutinied in several places beginning from Meerut and a large number of people from different sections of society rose up in rebellion.

- On 29 March 1857, Mangal Pandey, a young soldier, was hanged to death for attacking his officers in Barrackpore. This was too much for the sepoys. They refused to do the army drill using the new cartridges, which were suspected of being coated with the fat of cows and pigs. Thus, tension grew between the Company and sepoys.
- The sepoys were determined to bring an end to the Company's rule. From Meerut they rushed to Delhi.
- As the news of their arrival spread, the regiments stationed in Delhi also rose up in rebellion. They killed several British officers, seized arms and ammunitions, set buildings on fire.
- They met the Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar and proclaimed him as their leader.
- The Mughal Emperor got support from the rulers and chiefs of the country and together they rose against the British power.
- After the British were routed from Delhi, there was no uprising for a few days. Then, a spurt of mutiny began.
- Regiment after regiment mutinied and took off to join other troops at nodal points like Delhi, Kanpur and Lucknow. After them, the people of the towns and villages also rose up in rebellion and rallied around local leaders, zamindars and chiefs who were prepared to fight the British. Thus, a widespread revolt shook the British confidence over ruling India.
- The Company had no way out except suppressing the revolt with all its might. It brought reinforcement from England, passed new laws so that the rebels could be convicted with ease, and then moved into the storm centres of the revolt.
- The Company recaptured Delhi from the rebel forces in September 1857. Bahadur Shah Zafar was tried in court and sentenced to life imprisonment. He along with his wife were sent to prison in Rangoon.
- But people in other areas still continued to resist and fought with the British. The British had to fight for two years to suppress the massive forces of mass rebellion.
- The British had regained control of the country by the end of 1859 but they could not carry on ruling the land with the same policies anymore.
- The British Parliament passed a new Act in 1858 and transferred the powers of the East India Company to the British Crown in order to ensure a more responsible management of Indian affairs.
- The Governor-General of India was given the title of Viceroy, that is, a personal representative of the Crown. In this way the British government took direct responsibility for ruling India.
- All ruling chiefs of the country were allowed to pass on their kingdoms to their heirs, including adopted sons. However, they were made to acknowledge the British Queen as their Sovereign Paramount.

Revolt started with an outbreak of mutiny in Meerut on 10th May, 1857. After taking over the local administration, sepoys alongwith people of surrounding village marched to Delhi. They wanted the support of Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah.

Sepoys came to Red Fort and demanded that the emperor give them his blessings. Bahadur Shah had no option but to support them.

Revolt of 1857:

- Sepoys started revolt by capturing the arms from stores and plundering the treasury, afterward they attacked and ransack all government offices like jail, treasury-, telegraph office, record room, bungalows etc. Proclamations in Hindi, Urdu and Persian were put up calling local to join them and exterminate the foreign rule. When ordinary people joined sepoy, mutiny changed to revolt, the targets of attack widened.
- During the revolt in towns like Lucknow, Kanpur and Bareilly, the rich people and moneylenders were also attacked and property were looted, as they were seen as allies of British and they also oppressed the peasants in the recent past.

Ways of Communication during Revolt:

- There have been evidences of communication among the sepoy of different regiments before and during the revolt. Their emissaries moved from one station to other.
- Sepoys or Historians have said, panchayats were there and these were composed of native officers drawn from each regiments. Some of the decisions were taken collectively by these panchayats. Sepoys shared a common lifestyle and many of them came from the same caste, so they sat together and made their own rebellion.

Famous Leaders and Followers of Revolt:

- To fight the British, leadership and organisation were necessary. For leadership, rebels turned to those rulers to whom British has overthrown. Most of these displaced rulers joined the revolt due to pressure of locals or due to their own zeal.
- At some places religious leaders also took the leadership and inspired people to fight like fakir in Meerut and religious leaders in Lucknow who preached destruction of British rule.
- Local leader like Shah Mai in Barout, Uttar Pradesh, and Gonoo, a tribal leader of Kol tribals in singhbhum mobilised the communities for revolt.

The Role Played by Rumours and Prophecies in Revolt:

- Rumours and prophecies played an important role in outbreak of mutiny and revolt. There was rumour about the cartridge of Enfield rifle coated with fat of cow and pigs and mixing of bone, dust with atta.
- Both these rumours were believed and it was thought that it would corrupt the religion and caste of both Hindus and Muslims.
- There was a fear and suspicion that British wanted Indians to convert them to Christianity.
- There was also prophecy in the air that British rule would come to an end on the centenary of Battle of Plassey on 23rd June, 1757. So, these rumours and prophecies provided important psychological reasons to revolt against the British rule.
- Reasons to Believe in Rumours
- In the preceding years of 1857, many things were introduced by British which were new to Indian society and they were believed to be aimed at reforming Indian society like introduction of Western education, Western ideas, institutions, schools, colleges and universities.
- British formed new laws banning the Sati system and to allow widow remarriage. In 1850s, British annexed states like Avadh, Jhansi and Satara by refusing adoption and on the basis of misgovernment. New land laws and revenue settlements were made.
- These all above factors made Indians believe that British is changing the way of their life, custom, rules and replacing them with alien customs and rule.
- Suspicion was further aggravated with rapid spread of Christian missionaries and their activities.

Revolt in Awadh:

- Lord Dalhousie describe the Kingdom of Awadh as a Cherry that will drop into our mouth one day'.
- Lord Wellesley introduced subsidiary alliance in Awadh in 1801. Gradually, the British developed more interest in the kingdom of Awadh.
- The British were looking at role of Awadh as producer of cotton and indigo and also as principal market of upper India. .
- By the 1850's, British conquered all major areas of India like the Maratha lands, the Doab, the Carnatic, the Punjab and Bengal. The annexation of Awadh in 1856 completed the territorial annexation which started a century earlier with the annexation of Bengal.
- Dalhousie displaced Nawab Wazid Ali Shah and exiled to Calcutta on plea that Awadh is being misgoverned.

- British government wrongly assume that Nawab Wazid Ali was an unpopular ruler. On the contrary, he was widely loved and people bemoaned for the loss of Nawab.
- The removal of Nawab led to dissolution of courts and decline of culture. Musicians, dancers, poets, cooks, retainers and administrative officials, all lost their livelihood.

British Raj and the End of a War:

- With removal of Nawab all taluqdar of the Awadh were also disposed. They were disarmed and their forts were destroyed. With a new revenue system named Summary Settlement, taluqdar lost their very large share of revenue ; from land.
- Wherever possible, taluqdars were removed and settlement was done directly with peasants. This dispossession of taluqdar meant the complete break down of social order.
- Company directly settled revenue with peasants and revenue now was over assessed, so peasants were troubled.
- There was no longer any guarantee that in times of hardship or crop failure the revenue demand of the state would be reduced or the peasant would get the loan and support during festivals which they earlier used to get from taluqdar.
- Earlier, British officials had friendly relations with Indian sepoys but later Indian sepoys were subjected to racial abuse, low pay scale, difference in service.
- In 1840s, English officer developed a sense of superiority, physical violence also started and distance between officers and sepoys grew.
- As many Indian serving in Army were from Awadh, i.e. so local people of Awadh were also aware of unfair behaviour meted out to their brothers.
- Peasants of Awadh were already in trouble because of high revenue and taluqdar were looking for revenge to gain back their authority.
- All these factors cumulatively led to intense participation of people of Awadh in revolt of 1857.

Demands of Rebels:

- During the revolt only few proclamations and 'ishtahars' (notification) were issued by rebel leader to propagate their ideas and persuade people to join the revolt.
- So it is very difficult to reconstruct what happened in 1857 and what were the demands of rebels. The only way to know in detail about revolt of 1857 is by going through details of British officials and to know their point of view.
- Proclamation issued by rebel leader appealed to all sections of the population irrespective of cast and creed. The rebellion was seen as a war in which both Hindus and Muslims were equally to lose or gain.

- It was remarkable that during uprising, religious division between Hindus and Muslims was hardly noticeable despite the attempt of British government.

Rebels Against the Oppression:

- British rule ruined the status of peasants, artisans and weavers. There was a sense of fear and suspicion that British were determined to destroy the caste and religion of Hindus and Muslims and convert them to Christianity.
- Proclamations were issued which urged people to come together to save their livelihood, faith, identity and completely reject the things associated with firangi raj.
- During the revolt, rebellion attacked all the symbols and office of British government. Rebellion even targeted the allies of British government, ransacked moneylenders property and burnt account books.
- All the activities reflected an attempt of rebels to overturn traditional hierarchies and rebel against all oppression.

The Search of Alternative Power:

- Rebels tried to establish pre-British world of 18th century during the revolt.
- They tried to set up whole administrative machinery on one hand to carry out day to day activities during the war and on the other hand they tried to plan how to fight with British.

Repression by the British:

- To reconquer North India, British passed series of law. Whole North India was put under martial law, military officers and ordinary Britons were given power to punish Indian suspected of rebellion.
- Britain government brought reinforcement from Britain and arranged double pronged strategy to capture Delhi. Delhi was captured in late September only.
- British government faced very stiff resistance in the Awadh and they had to use military power at gigantic scale.
- In Awadh, they tried to break unity between landlords and peasants by offering their land back to landlords. Rebel landlords were dispossessed and loyalists were rewarded.

Description of Revolt through Art and Literature:

- There are very few records on the rebels point of view. Most of the narratives of about 1857 revolt were obtained from official account.
- British officials obviously left their version in diaries, letters, autobiographies and official histories and reports.

- The stories of the revolt that were published in British newspaper and magazines narrated in detail about the violence of the mutineers and these stories inflamed public feelings and provoked demand for retribution and revenge.
- Paintings, etchings, posters, cartoons, bazaar prints produced by British and Indian also served as important record of revolt.
- Many pictures were drawn by the British painters to offer variety of images for different events during the revolt. These images provoked a range of different emotions and reactions.
- Painting like 'Relief of Lucknow' painted by Thomas Jones Barker in 1859 commemorate the British heroes who saved the English and repressed the rebels.

The Honour of English Women:

- Newspaper reports shape the feelings and attitudes of events inflamed particularly by tale of violence against women and children. There was public demands in Britain for revenge and retribution.
- The British government was asked to protect the honour of innocent women and ensure safety of helpless children.
- Artists expressed as well as shaped these sentiments through their visual representations of trauma and suffering.
- Painting 'In Memoriam' painted by Joseph Noel Paton in 1859 depicted the anxious moment in which women and children huddled in a circle looking helpless and innocent, seemingly waiting for the inevitable dishonour, violence and death. Painting stirs up the imagination and seek to provoke anger and fury. These paintings represent rebels as violent and brutish

Feeling of Revenge among Rebels:

- As news about severeness of revolt spread, there was great anger, shock and demand of retribution, severe repression and grew louder.
- Threatened by the rebellion, the British felt that they had to demonstrate their invincibility. There were innumerable pictures and cartoons in British press that sanctioned brutal repression and violent reprisal.
- Rebels were executed publicly, blown from cannon or hanged from gallows. There were mass execution. To instill a sense of fear among the people, most of these punishments were given in public.
- Governor General Canning declared that gesture of leniency and show of mercy would help in winning back the loyalty of sepoys. At that time, there was voice for revenge and idea of Canning was mocked.

Nationalist Imageries of the Revolt:

- Revolt of 1857 was celebrated as first war of Independence. National movement in 20th century drew its inspiration from the events of 1857.
- Art, literature, history, stories, paintings, films have helped in keeping the memory of 1857 revolt alive.
- The leaders of the revolt were presented as heroic figure leading country into battle, rousing the people to righteous indignation against oppressive imperial rule.
- Nationalist imageries of the revolt had helped to shape the nationalist imagination.

Important Terms:

- Bell of arms: Store for weapons.
- Firangi: a word of Persian origin, meant white skinned foreigner.
- Mutiny: Rebellion by soldiers.
- Revolt: Mass uprising by people against ruler.
- Enfield Rifle: Whose cartridge was greased with the fat of cow and pig, that infuriated Hindus and Moslems alike.
- Resident: The representative of the East India Company to the native kings, located at the latter's capital.
- Subsidiary Alliance: A treaty that made native kingdoms dependent on the company for military power. It was brought by Lord Wellesely.

Time line:

- 1849 – Governor General Lord Dalhousie announced that after the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the family of the king would be shifted out of the Red Fort and given another place in Delhi to reside in.
- 1856 – (i) Governor-General Canning decided that Bahadur Shah Zafar would be the last Mughal king and after his death his descendants would be recognised as princes.
(ii) The Company passed a new law which stated that every new person who took up employment in the Company's army had to agree to serve overseas if required.
- 29 Mar, 1857 – Mangal Pandey, a young soldier, was hanged to death for attacking his officer in Barrackpore.
- May, 1857 – Sepoys mutinied in several places.
- 10 May, 1857 – Sepoys rushed to Delhi from Meerut.
- Sep, 1857 – Delhi was recaptured from the rebel forces.

- Oct, 1858 – Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar along with his wife was sent to prison in Rangoon.
- 1858 – A new Act passed by the British Parliament transferred the power of the East India Company to the British Crown.
- Nov, 1862 – Bahadur Shah Zafar died in the jail of Rangoon.

