

THE REVOLT OF 1857

The Revolt of 1857, also known as the "First War of Independence," was the first significant attempt by Indians to end British imperialism. It started on 10 May 1857, first in the form of sepoy mutiny and later as a concerted effort by Indian rulers under the de jure supervision of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. As the Revolt of 1857 posed a considerable threat to British power, it was proved as a watershed movement for the British perspective towards India. They became more cautious in their approach towards administration, the nature of the army, differential treatment of the vast Indian communities, etc.

The Revolt of 1857 was mainly concentrated across the vast portions of northern India, engulfing the peasantry and other civilian populations that stood side-by-side with their leaders. Many prominent leaders of the Revolt and common mass fought bravely with the British forces.

Revolt of 1857 Causes

There were several factors for the 1857 Revolt, although the British's ruthless exploitation of the Indians was common in all. These factors were already in the process of pressure build-up since the consolidation of Bengal in 1764, first leading to the numerous minor rebellions and ultimately in the Revolt of 1857. These factors are briefly described below:

Political Causes of Revolt of 1857

- Many [princely states](#) were annexed by using the **Doctrine of lapse**, such as Satara in 1848 and Jhansi in 1854 by **Dalhousie**. Awadh, however, was annexed under an excuse that Nawab Wazid Ali Shah was mismanaging the state.
- These annexations created resentment among the deposed rulers as well as their subjects, many of which were recruited as sepoys.

Economic Causes of 1857 Revolt

- **Impact on traditional industries:** The British aimed to make India a consumer of British goods, leading to the collapse of industries like textiles, metalwork, glass, and paper. By 1813, Indian handicrafts lost domestic and foreign markets, and British factories were captured and monopolised through war and colonisation.
- **Impact on agriculture:** The **land revenue policies** followed by the Britishers led to the commercialisation of agriculture and made the land a tradable commodity. It gave rise to new landlords, absentee landlords and moneylenders that created

resentment in older landlords. The high burden of taxes, erstwhile cultivators being taken away from their lands, etc., made the peasants desperate for a regime change.

Social Causes of Revolt of 1857

- **Alien rule:** Britishers never mixed with the Indian people and treated even the **upper-class Indians** with contempt.
- **Interference in religion:** Religious leaders, such as **Pandits** and **Maulvis**, have also lost all of their previous power and prestige.

Administrative Factors

- **Discrimination in the army:** There was discrimination in salary, cost of maintenance and the military ranks between Indian sepoys and their British counterparts. They were also treated with humiliation and abuse, which created discontent amongst Indian sepoys.
- **Discrimination in civil administration:** Indians were deprived of higher posts, which were primarily taken by the British.

Immediate Cause of Revolt of 1857

The atmosphere was so surcharged that even a small issue could lead to revolution.

- **Cartridges of the new Enfield rifle**, which had recently been introduced in the army, had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off before the cartridge was loaded into the rifle.
- **Pig and beef fat** were used to make the **grease**. The **Hindu and Muslim** soldiers were so outraged by this that they began to suspect that the government was actively attempting to undermine their religion. It was the immediate root of the uprising.

Revolt of 1857 Events

- **Barrackpore:** On 29th March 1857, **Mangal Pandey**, stationed at **Barrackpore**, revolted against his British officers. He was hanged, which created anger and resentment amongst the sepoys.
- **Meerut:** On 24th April, ninety men of the **Third Native Cavalry** stationed at **Meerut** refused to use the greased cartridges. Eighty-five of them were dismissed and sentenced to ten years **imprisonment** on 9th May.
 - The rest of the Indian sepoys reacted strongly to this, and the next day, on **10th May**, the entire **Indian garrison** revolted.

- **March to Delhi:** After freeing their comrades and killing the British officers, they decided to march on to Delhi.
- **It was clear that it was not merely an army mutiny**, as people from surrounding areas began to loot the **military bazaars** and attacked and burnt the bungalows of the British as soon as they heard the shots fired by the sepoys on their officers.
- **Hindu-Muslim unity:** In Meerut and Delhi, the Hindu sepoys overwhelmingly declared Bahadur Shah to be their Emperor. As a sign of respect for the **Hindus' religious beliefs**, cow slaughter was banned wherever the sepoys arrived.
- **Spread of Revolt:** In the next month, the entire **Bengal Army** rose in revolt. The Whole of North and North West India was up in arms against the British.
 - **Central India:** Thousands of Indore's soldiers joined the sepoy rebels in Indore. **Gwalior's troops** went over to **Tantya Tope and Rani of Jhansi**.
 - **In East Punjab**, Mainpuri, Bulandshahr, Danapur, Mathura. Agra. Lucknow, Allahabad, Banaras, Shahabad, Etwah, and Aligarh, wherever there were Indian troops, they revolted.
 - With the revolt in the army, the **police and local administration** also collapsed.
- **Effects of 1857 revolt:** Wherever a revolt erupted, the government's treasury was taken away, the magazine was ransacked, barracks and courthouses were set on fire, and prison gates were thrown open.
 - Telegraph lines were severed, and horsemen carrying alerts to Delhi were stopped.
 - Peasants and dispossessed zamindars attacked the moneylenders and new zamindars who had displaced them from the land.
 - Destroyed the government files and the accounting records of the moneylenders.
 - Attacked the **British-established law courts**, revenue offices, revenue records and police stations.

Revolt of 1857 Leaders

The **storm centres** of the uprising were located in Arrah, Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, and Lucknow. Even though they acknowledged **Emperor Bahadur Shah's suzerainty**, all of these locations decided their own rulers and continued to be independent.

Leaders	Their contribution
Bakht Khan at Delhi	- Bahadur Shah served as the leader of Delhi. However, the soldiers held true power.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On July 3rd, 1857, Bakht Khan, who had organised the soldiers' uprising in Bareilly, arrived in Delhi and assumed real power. - He assembled a Court of soldiers made up of both Muslim and Hindu rebels.
Begum Hazrat Mahal at Lucknow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Begum of Awadh provided the leadership and proclaimed her son, Birjis Kadr, the Nawab of Awadh. - But, Maulavi Ahmadullah of Faizabad, who organised rebellions and fought the British, was the most popular leader.
Rani Lakshmi Bai at Jhansi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She believed that she had been robbed of her ruling rights in defiance of recognised Hindu law and fought valiantly. - Led the rebels in the region of Bundelkhand against the British. - Battle: East India Company's forces under Hugh Rose encircled the fort of Jhansi. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tatya Tope and Lakshmibai successfully assaulted the British in Gwalior and proclaimed Nana Sahib as the Peshwa.
Nana Saheb at Kanpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nana Saheb was the leader of the Kanpur regiment. - He attacked the British soldiers of the 53rd Native infantry at Kanpur with Tatya Tope in June 1857. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack on the British East India Company's entrenchment under General Sir Hugh Wheeler. • Sir Hugh Wheeler surrendered to Nana Saheb in exchange for a secure passage to Allahabad. - Nana Saheb announced himself as the Peshwa or the ruler after expelling the British from Kanpur.
Kunwar Singh at Bihar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He marched hundreds of miles to reach Mirzapur, Banda, and the area around Kanpur with a war band of Danapur sepoys and the rebel Ramgarh state battalion. - He reached up to Rewa state and returned to Banda and then back to Arrah, where he engaged and defeated the British troops. - He suffered severe injuries and passed away on April 27, 1858, in his ancestral home in the Jagdishpur village.

Tatya Tope at Kanpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rebelled against the British at Kanpur and later at Gwalior. - He's known for his fearsome guerilla tactics. - In 1857, he captured Kanpur and established the authority of Nana Sahib there. • But after being forced to retreat by the British at the Second Battle of Kanpur, he went to Gwalior.
-----------------------------	---

Reasons of Failure of the Revolt of 1857

- **Lack of a Unified Programme and Ideology:** The rebellion swept off the British system of government and administration in India, but they had **no forward-looking plan** in mind. This made them rely on the outmoded feudal system with **Bahadur Shah** at its head.
 - This system had lost its vitality and was unable to withstand the onslaught of the British.
- **Lack of Unity among Indians:** While the sepoys of the Bengal army were revolting, some soldiers in Punjab and south India fought on the side of the British to crush these rebellions.
- No accompanying rebellions in most of eastern and southern India.
- The **Sikhs** did not support the rebels because of the possibility of the revival of **Mughal authority**.
- Besides this, there were some elements of the peasantry that had profited from British rule and supported the British during the revolt.
- **Lack of Support from the Educated Indians:** They did not support the revolt because, in their view, the revolt was **backwards-looking**, and they mistakenly believed that the British would lead the country towards **modernisation**.
- **Military Superiority of the British:** British imperialism, which was at the height of its influence throughout the world and was backed by the majority of Indian princes and chiefs, proved to be militarily superior to the rebels.
 - While the rebels lacked discipline and **central command**.

Revolt of 1857 Consequences

- **Changes in Military Organisation:** To prevent any further revolt by the Indian soldiers:

- The number of **European soldiers** was increased, and they were kept in key **geographical and military positions**.
- The Indian section of the army was now organised in accordance with the "**divide and rule**" policy.
- To prevent soldiers from developing **nationalistic feelings**, regiments were formed based on **caste, community, and region**.
- **Transfer of Power:** The power to govern India passed from the East India Company to the **British Crown through an Act of 1858**.
 - A **Secretary of State for India**, aided by a **Council**, was now in charge of **India's governance**. Previously, the **Company's Directors** wielded this authority.
- **Divide and Rule:** This **policy of "divide and rule"** was also introduced in the civilian population.
 - Muslims were severely punished, and discrimination was made against them in **public appointments** and in other areas.
 - A policy of preferential treatment of **Muslims** was adopted towards the end of the 19th century.
 - These policies created problems for the Indian freedom struggle and contributed to the growth of **communalism**.
- **New Policy towards the Princely:** The earlier **policy of annexation** was now abandoned, and the rulers of these states were now authorised to adopt heirs.