



REVOLT OF 1857

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Abstract: The year of 1857 under British rule saw the major uprising by Indian people against British rule. People from all sections of society such as sepoys, zamindars, peasants, Dalits and even women rose to rebellion. Several events such as Doctrine of Lapse by Dalhousie, Subsidiary alliance by Wellesley and greased cartridges were considered as the major cause behind the rebellion. This paper is an attempt to look at the causes behind the revolt, the people who rose into rebellion and the nature of revolt.

INTRODUCTION

With the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, when Mughal Empire was declining, several powers tried to get the hold of India such as Marathas, Afghans, Britishers, French and others. But it was the Britishers who were able to manipulate the political chaos of 18th century to their benefit. With the Battle of Plassey, the future of India came into focus that whether it belonged to Indians or to Britishers.

CAUSES

In 1765 British after winning the Battle of Buxar, 1764 got Shah Alam II the then Mughal Emperor to sign Treaty of Allahabad and were granted Diwani rights of Orissa, Bengal and Bihar to English East India Company and became the first Mughal emperor to be granted the pension. From 1765 till 1857 i.e., within hundred years of colonial rule several changes in the economic system were introduced by the officials of the English East India Company which can be seen with the establishment of monopoly over the trade in Bengal. Apart from this several land revenue policies were introduced that uprooted the zamindars from their lands. The Britishers main task to extract as much revenue as possible from the provinces like Bengal the land revenue was doubled from what it was under Mughal Emperors. With the introduction of Permanent settlement in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis though had provision to collect a fixed amount of revenue from Zamindars but there was 'sun-set' law according to which the lands of zamindars were sold or taken by Britishers if they failed to pay revenue at the fixed date and time. Thus, several Zamindars lost their lands and thus revolted against Britishers.

The zamindars were also joined by peasants because the burden of heavy taxation ultimately falls on them. The peasants joined talukdars or zamindars in revolt especially the majorly effected region was Awadh as majority of the peasants rose to rebellion after Awadh's annexation in 1856 on the charge of bad governance by Wajid Ali Shah, the last independent Nawab of Awadh. It can be seen here that India was plundered economically under British as the revenue collected from India was taken to England and the public works in India were neglected, the Indian economy collapsed. Due to the coming of British's manufactured cloth that was cheap in price Indian hand weavers and spinners lost their jobs and starved to death. The Britishers completely broke down the communal landownership in India and burdened Ryots with high taxes which makes it unbearable for them to survive. Thus, it was this policy of exploitation by English East India Company that forced peasants to rise to rebellion.

It was after getting control over the economy that the officials of the East India Company started meddling in Indian Political scenarios. In India with decline of Mughal Emperor there were two major powers that rose to prominence one is the Marathas and other were Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore. In order to get control over them Lord Wellesley introduced Subsidiary Alliance in 1798 which allowed to station British army in kingdoms to protect them from neighboring enemies, this was first accepted by Nizam of Hyderabad to get protection from Mysore ruler Tipu Sultan. Britishers got control over Mysore in the third Anglo-Mysore War and with this the kingdom of Mysore too came under their control. Britishers even got control over Marathas in 1817-1819 by defeating them in Third Anglo-Maratha War and with this the aim of controlling India got down and it were the Britishers that benefitted from the situation.

Another reason behind the revolt of 1857 was the introduction of social and religious reforms in 19th century which led to discontent both among Hindus and Muslims as it affected their religious beliefs and sentiments. In 1813 Charter act was passed that allowed

Christian missionaries to propagate Christianity and in fact it allowed to spread English or western education among Indians. In 1829 William Bentinck abolished Sati in 1829.

In 1850 another act was introduced called LEXI-LOCI act that further affected Hindus and Muslims by enabling the Indians who converted into Christianity the right to property.

It was in 1856 with the introduction of Doctrine of Lapse by Dalhousie that further aggravated the already present discontent among the locals. It denied the right to succession of the property by the adopted son of the Indian Kingdom. With this policy several Indian kingdoms were annexed by Dalhousie such as Satara, Jhansi and Sambalpur. It was Dalhousie who also ended the pension received by Peshwa Nana Saheb as he was the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II.

He also introduced Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856 that further hurt the beliefs of Hindus.

The other cause that is mostly highlighted by Britishers was the introduction of Greased cartridges or the Enfield rifles in 1856 and with the killing of Lieutenant Baugh and Hugeson by Mangal Panday, sepoy of 34th infantry of Barrackpore on 29th March 1857 that the Revolt became inevitable.

Thus, we can see that the revolt of 1857 was the result of these steps or policies that created discontent among Indians who then rose into rebellion.

EVENTS OF REVOLT

After the event of Barrackpore revolt spread in almost every part of North India. On 24th April 1857 the sepoys of Meerut cantonment refused to use the greased cartridges and they rose to rebellion by killing European officers.

It was on 11th May 1857, the sepoys from Meerut entered Delhi and killed European officers such as Simon Fraser. Sepoys then entered Red Fort and coerced Bahadur Shah II to be the leader of revolt and claim him as the Emperor of Hindustan. Bakht Khan, a Wahabi became the leader of revolt in Delhi in 1857 was a Wahabi who fought against British at the forefront. He took the pledge to fight against the British till the last of his breath.

With this the revolt spread to other parts of India such as Jhansi, Lucknow, Awadh, Kanpur, Bareilly, Bihar and Western India.

In Kanpur Nana Saheb rose to rebellion as he was already denied the pension. In Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai rose into rebellion against the Britishers. In Lucknow Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Awadh's last Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and her son Birjis Qadir took arms.

Kunwar Singh, zamindar of Jagdishpur in Bihar revolted against British and joined the revolt as his estates were confiscated by British. The revolt spread to other areas as well such as Gwalior under Sindhia, Indore under Holkars.

In the revolt of 1857, Muslims too participated in order to restore the old Mughal order in India. Shah Wali Ullah was the pioneer in reviving of the Mughal rule and he pointed out the factors that led to its decline. As per him the taxation system of Mughals which was unbearable for the peasants, artisans and traders to pay led to its decline. Thus, what was required was the equitable distribution of taxes and national wealth. His aim was to establish a Muslim state based on the original teachings of Quran and therefore he led to anti-British Movement in 19th century.

Wahabis too played an important role in the revolt of 1857. They declared Jihad against the Sikh Government in Punjab and formed secret organizations as highlighted by K.M. Ashraf in MUSLIM REVIVALISTS AND THE REVOLT OF 1857

But it was seen that apart from these prominent leaders there were several Dalit women and men who participated in revolt to fight for their motherland. Dalits too participated in the revolt of 1857 as pointed out by Badri Naryan Tiwari in 'Dalit and Memories of 1857' where several Dalits who participated in revolt were highlighted such as the four stones of 'Shahid Baba' depicting four chamars of Majhauwa village, Azamgarh District Uttar Pradesh who lost their lives in the revolt.

There were other such examples where we can see the participation of Dalits such as Ganga baba who joined Nana Saheb in Bithoor, Uttar Pradesh. Ganga baba or Gangu Baba lived nearby Bithoor and was considered very strong and it was pointed that he was asked by Nana Saheb to join the revolt when he saw Gangu Baba walking with a tiger on his back. It was believed that Gangu Baba killed approximately 150 soldiers of East India Company. But later he was executed and hanged from a neem tree in Chunniganj.

Another prominent Dalit who can be seen as the pioneer of revolt was Mata Din Bhangi. It was Mata Din Bhangi who actually informed Mangal Pandey about the greased cartridges being used in the Enfield Rifles.

Makka Pasi killed several British soldiers at Chinhat near Awadh under Captain Lawrence. Later he was shot dead by Captain Lawrence.

Amar Shaheed Vira Pasi, too was a Dalit Martyr in 1857. He worked as a security guard of Raja Beni Madhav Singh of Uttar Pradesh. When Raja was arrested on the charge of participating in revolt it was Vira Pasi who helped him to escape the prison.

Apart from Dalit Men, several Dalit women too participated in revolt of 1857. Charu Gupta in her article '(En)Gendering Dalit Narratives of 1857' used the term Dalit Viranganas to highlight the role of the Dalit women in 1857 rebellion.

Dalit women such as Jhalkari Bai of Kori caste. Her husband was a soldier in the army of Raja Gangadhar Rao. It was Jhalkari Bai who joined the Durga Dal of Lakshmi Bai's army. She had similar face and body structure as that of Rani Lakshmi Bai and it was believed that when British army besieged Jhansi it was Jhalkari Bai who fought bravely and even helped Lakshmi Bai to escape the fort.

Apart from her Uda Devi, wife of Makka Pasi joined begum Hazrat Mahal in Lucknow. She attacked British army at Sikandar Bagh under Campbell and killed thirty-six British soldiers and later she shot herself.

The only areas that were minimally affected were Bengal, Punjab and South India.

NATURE OF THE REVOLT

The Revolt of 1857 was called the War of Independence by the nationalist Historian V.D. Savarkar in his book 'The INDIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, 1857.' He is of the view that greased cartridges were not the major cause of revolt of 1857 as if this was the case then the reason for the participation of Nana Saheb, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Lakshmi Bai cannot be explained. As per him these leaders were neither in the English army nor were they forced to use cartridges as was done by sepoys. There were two great principles behind the revolt of 1857 that was highlighted by him- Swaraj and Swadharma that played a major role in the unification of Hindus and Muslims against their common enemy i.e., British. S.N. Sen in his book Eighteen Fifty-Seven too agreed with V.D. Savarkar on the fact that the revolt of 1857 is a national revolt.

S.B. Chaudhuri in his book 'Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies 1857-1859' saw the revolt of 1857 as the combined efforts of the people of all classes against Britishers. He goes on to explain that it was the Britishers who applied the 'goondas' to collect the land revenue and actually destroyed the land system of India and the gentry class and forced the peasants to join the uprising.

R.P. Dutt in 'India Today', argued that the revolt of 1857 is a reaction of the feudal lords and princes who were denied their rights over their hereditary lands. For him the revolt of 1857 was 'Feudal in Nature.'

Rudrangshu Mukherjee in his book 'Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858' examined the connection between Talukdars and peasants in Awadh and saw that the peasants were the main strength of Talukdars in this region as the majority of them in Awadh rose to rebellion. Eric Stokes in his book The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857 saw the revolt as being primarily the revolt of peasants.

Amar Farooqui in his work 'ZAFAR AND THE RAJ' explained the government that was established by sipahis in Delhi during revolt. He argued that there were seeds of 'Modern Democracy' in the government of sipahis at Delhi. The sepoys at Delhi formed the 'Court of administration' which had its own constitution written in Urdu. It has ten members with three branches representing infantry, cavalry and artillery consisting of six members and four civilians. These members were elected and from amongst them there was a president called Sadr-e-jalsa having two votes and vice president called naib-sadr-e-jalsa. The court held daily sessions and the decision-making power was with the court members. Bahadur Shah Zafar was allowed to attend the courts.

CONCLUSION

The revolt of 1857 was a war of independence as not only sepoys but people from all walks of life in North India rose against the exploitative British rule. Though they had different reasons as can be seen the feudal lords participated as they had to reclaim their lost territories, peasants joined them due to burden of taxation and even as they were uprooted from their means of survival but everyone had the same motive behind the revolt and that was to uproot the Britishers from India and restore the rule in their hands. The revolt of 1857 also saw people from marginalized communities such as Dalits and Dalit women to participate in the revolt for the sake of India or their motherland. Thus, we can conclude that the revolt of 1857 was the first major uprising of Indians against a foreign power.

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