

Theme 11.Rebels and the Raj

The Revolt of 1857 and its Representations

The 1857 Revolt is an important part of the Indian history that began as a sepoy mutiny of the British East India Company. Though it was first started in the town of Meerut but later it was erupted into all the other mutinies. The major aggressions were happened to the present day northern Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi region.

Sequence of events in 1857 and Pattern of the revolt

- On **10 May 1857**, the sepoys in the cantonment of **Meerut** broke in mutiny. It began in the native infantry and spread to the cavalry and then to the city.
- The sepoys seized the bell of arms and plundered the treasury. They attacked government buildings-the jail, court, post office, telegraph office, bungalows, treasury etc.
- Then the sepoys marched to Delhi and ordinary people joined them.
- The sepoys appealed to the Mughal Emperor Bahdur Shah to accept the leadership of the revolt. Finding no other option, he accepted the demand of the sepoys. Thus the revolt secured a kind of legitimacy because it could be carried on in the name of the Mughal emperor.
- In towns like Lucknow, Kanpur and Bareilly, money lenders and the rich also became the objects of rebel anger. Their houses were looted and destroyed.
- The mutiny in the sepoy ranks now turned to a rebellion. The rebels defied all kinds of authority and hierarchy.
- Pattern of the revolt in every cantonment followed a similar pattern.
- There was communication between the sepoys lines of various cantonments.
- For example, the 7th Awadh Irregular Cavalry had refused to accept the new cartridge. The matter they informed to the 48th Native Infantry. Sepoys moved from one station to another. People talked about the rebellion.
- **Was the revolt of 1857 planned and coordinated?** It is very difficult to provide answer to such question. However some events provide hints to how the mutinies were organized. Captain Hearsey of the Awadh Military Police had been given protection by his Indian subordinates. The 41st Native Infantry which stationed in the same area insisted the Military police to kill Hearsey. The military Police refused to do so.
- It was decided that the matter would be settled by a panchayat composed of Indian officers selected from each regiment. Charles Ball wrote one of the earliest histories of the revolt of 1857. He pointed out that the panchayats were assembled during night in the Kanpur sepoy lines and decisions were taken collectively. So it is not difficult to imagine them sitting together to decide their own future.

Nature of leadership and supporters

- The rebels needed leadership and organization to fight against the British. They appealed to the old Mughal emperor to accept the leadership of the revolt. At first Bahadur Shah rejected this demand. But when the sepoys defied the Mughal court etiquette in the Red Fort, he agreed to be the nominal leader of the rebellion.

- **In Kanpur, Nana Sahib**, the successor of Peshwa Baji Rao II became the leader of the revolt.
- **In Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai** assumed the leadership of the uprising.
- **In Arrah in Bihar, Kunwar Singh**, a local zamindar became leader under popular pressure.
- **In Awadh**, the displacement of the popular nawab Wajid Ali Shah and the annexation of the state were still very fresh in the mind of the people. In luck now; people celebrated the fall of British rule by declaring **Birjis Qadr**, the young Nawab as their leader.
- Local leaders were also emerged in several areas and urged the peasants, zamindars and tribals to revolt. **Shah Mal** organized the villagers of pargana Barout in Uttar Pradesh. **Gonoo**, a tribal cultivator of Singhbhum in Chotanagapur, emerged as a rebel leader of the Kol tribals of the region.

Role of Rumours and prophecies in the Revolt of 1857.

- Rumours and prophecies played an important part in moving people in to action during the Revolt of 1857.
- There was a rumour that the new cartridges were greased with the fat of cows and pigs which would pollute their castes and religion.
- The rumours about the British trying to destroy the religion of Indians by mixing the bone dust of cows and pigs into the flour led people to avoid touching the flour. There was fear and suspicion that the British wanted to convert Indians to Christianity.
- The rumour about the British rule coming to an end on the centenary of the Battle of Plassey also reinforced the call for a revolt against the masters (23 June 1857).
- The British policies to reform Indian society by introducing western education and social reforms targeted their long cherished customs and practices.
- The activities of Christian missionaries also created doubt and discomfort.
- The annexations on the pretext of the Doctrine of Lapse also made the people suspicious of British intentions.

Subsidiary Alliance

- Subsidiary Alliance was a system introduced by **Lord Wellesley in 1798**. Those who entered into such an alliance with the British had to accept certain terms and conditions.
- The British would be responsible for protecting their ally from external and internal threats to their power.
- In the territory of the ally, a British armed contingent would be stationed.
- The ally would have to provide the resources for maintaining this contingent.
- The ally could enter into agreements with other rulers or engage in warfare only with the permission of the British.
- The ally had to keep the resident who was the representative of the Governor General and was not under direct British rule.

Annexation of Awadh.

- Dalhousie described the kingdom of Awadh as “a cherry that will drop into our mouth one day”. **Awadh was formally annexed into the British empire in 1856 by Lord Dalhousie.**
- The conquest happened in stages. The Subsidiary Alliance had been imposed on Awadh in 1801.
- By the terms of this alliance the Nawab had to disband his military force, allow the British to position their troops within the kingdom, and act in accordance with the advice of the British Resident who was attached to the court. Thus the Nawab became dependent on British.
- The British were keen to acquire Awadh as its soil was good for growing indigo and cotton and was ideally located for trade.

- Annexation of Awadh would complete the territorial annexation by the British beginning with that of Bengal a century earlier.
- It was annexed on the grounds of maladministration. The British wrongly assumed that the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was an unpopular ruler; on the contrary he was widely loved.

Displacement of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah

- Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was displaced and exiled to Calcutta. He was so admired by his people that his subjects followed him all the way to Kanpur singing songs of lament. There was widespread emotional upheaval at his dethronement. Contemporary writers observed that “The life was gone out of the body, and the body of this town had been left lifeless...”Folk song mourned that “the honourable English came and took the country”.

Displacement of the Taluqdars

- The annexation of Awadh displaced not only the Nawab , but also the taluqdars.The country side of Awadh had many estates and forts of taluqdars.They had held power for generations. Under the Nawab the taluqdars had enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy as long as they accepted the suzerainty of the Nawab.They paid revenue of their taluqs to the British. Many taluqdars had armies of about 12,000 foot soldiers and even the smaller ones had armies of about 200.The British did not tolerate the power of the taluqdars.They were annexed ,disarmed and their best forts were destroyed.
- The British land revenue policy reduced their power. They introduced the **Summary Settlement in 1856**.It was based on the idea that taluqdars had acquired the land by force and fraud and thus had no permanent rights over land. They removed them from power. For example, in pre-British times, taluqdars held 67% of the total number of villages in Awadh and after the introduction of the Summary Settlement, this number reduced to a mere 38%.
- By removing them, the British thought they will settle the land with the owners of soil. They wanted to reduce exploitation done to peasants. They wanted to increase the revenue returns to the state. In actual practice, this did not happen-although the revenues increased, the burden on the peasants did not reduce. Officials soon found out that there was increase in revenue rates from 30 to 70 percent and large areas of Awadh were heavily over assessed.
- With the removal of the taluqdars, the peasants were directly expose to the harsh revenue policies of the British and could no longer avail loans in times of hardship or crop failure. There were no means by which the payment of revenue could be postponed upon failure of the crop or other unforeseen situation. The ties of loyalty and patronage had bound the peasant to the taluqdar but it was disrupted. The British over-assessed the revenue due and used inflexible methods of collection.

Relation between the white and Indian officers

- Prior to the uprising of 1857, the relationship between the white and Indian officers was cordial-the former were well versed in Hindustani, fenced and wrestled with their Indian counterparts and often went out hawking with them, and were thus, disciplinarian and father figure rolled into one.
- In the 1840s, this relationship underwent a drastic change, with the British officers considering their Indian sepoys as racially inferior and riding roughshod over their sensibilities.

Close links between the peasants and sepoys

The grievances of the peasants were also discussed within sepoys lines as most of the soldiers were recruited from the peasantry. **Awadh was called “the nursery of the Bengal Army”.**

The sepoys also complained about the difficulty of getting leave misbehavior and racial abuse of their white officers. Thus, their discontent spilled over into the ranks peasantry. When the sepoys took up arms they were joined by the peasants.

What the rebels wanted (Vision of unity)

- The Proclamations and ishtahars(notifications)were issued by rebel leaders. For example the Azamgarh Proclamation on 25 August 1857.
- The rebels tried to get the support of all sections of the society irrespective of their caste and creed.
- The rebellion was viewed as a war in which both Hindus and Muslims stood. Both communities stood equally to lose or gain.
- The ishtahars brought to the forefront memories of the pre-British Hindu Muslim past.
- The proclamation issued under the name of Bahadur Shah appealed to the people to join the fight under the standards of both Muhammad and Mahavir.
- Thus religious differences were not visible between the two communities in 1857 despite. The British attempt to create a wedge between them but the rebels tried to materialize their vision of unity.
- The proclamation completely rejected everything associated with British rule. (firangi raj)
- They condemned the British for the annexations they had carried out and the treaties they had broken.
- Rebels declared that the British could not be trusted
- The British land revenue settlements or systems had dispossessed landlords
- Foreign commerce had ruined the weavers and artisans
- British rule was attacked and accused of destroying a way of life that was familiar and cherished.
- The rebels wanted to restore the previous life.
- The rebels wanted their livelihood to be secure.

The vision of different social groups

- In many places the rebellion against the British widened into attack on all those who were seen as allies of the British or local oppressors.
- The rebels deliberately sought to humiliate the elites of the city. In villages, they burnt account books and ransacked moneylenders’ houses.
- This was an attempt to overturn traditional hierarchies, rebel against all oppressors, which presents a glimpse of an alternative vision of a egalitarian society.
- Such visions were not articulated in the proclamations which sought to unify all social groups in the fight against firangi raj.

The search for alternative power

- In the regions where the British rule collapsed, the rebels set up parallel administration (in Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur). But they proved to be a failure.
- The rebel leadership wanted to restore the pre-British world of the 18th century.
- The administrative structure established by the rebels aimed at meeting the demands of war.
- The leaders went back to the culture of the court.
- Appointments were made to various posts.

- Arrangements were made for the collection of land revenue and the payments of the troops.
- Side by side plans were made to fight battles against the British.

Repression: Steps taken by the British to quell the uprising.

The British passed a series of laws to help them quell the insurgency. Whole North India was brought under martial law. Military officers and even ordinary Britons were given the power to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion. The ordinary processes of law and trial were suspended and it was put out that rebellion would have only one punishment –death. The British used military power on a gigantic scale. But this was not the only instrument they used. The British tried to break up the unity promising to give back to the big land holders their estates. Rebel landholders were dispossessed and the loyal rewarded.

Images of the Revolt

- Official records tell us about the fears and anxieties of officials and their perception of the rebels. The stories of the revolt that were published in British newspapers and magazines in gory detail the violence of the mutineers and these stories inflamed public feelings and provoked demands of retribution and revenge.
- One important record of the mutiny is the pictorial images (posters and cartoons) produced by the Indians and British.
- British pictures provide a variety of images that were meant to provoke emotions and reactions.
- Some of them commemorate the British heroes who saved the English and repressed the rebels.
- **Relief of Lucknow** painted by **Thomas Jones Barker** is an example. It represents the siege of Lucknow by mutineers and the British heroes-Campbell, Outram and Havelock.
- **In Memorium** painted by **Joseph Noel Paton** depicts violence against English women and children.
- **Ms.wheeler's painting**- Miss Wheeler is shown as defending herself against the Sepoys at Cawnpore'
- Punch (Magazine) Cartoons published in Britain (1857)-“**Justice**”, “**The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger**” and “**The clemency of Canning.**”
- Images of executions of Indian soldiers in Peshawar.

Nationalist imageries

- The national movement drew its inspiration from the events of 1857.
- It was the first war of Independence in which people of all the sections of society came together to fight the foreign rule.
- Leaders of the revolt were presented as heroic figures leading the country into battle of freedom.
- The revolt roused the people to come together and fight against the oppressive British rule in India.
- The poets and the writers also gave their full support with their narratives and poems.
- Many books have been written to highlight the contribution of many patriots like Rani Jhansi, Tantia Tope and many others. Specially Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and her poem : “khoob lari mardani who to Jhansi wali rani thi”

Key words

Bell of arms: A storeroom in which weapons are kept.

Firangi: A term used to designate foreigners

Mutiny: A collective disobedience of rules and regulations within armed forces
Revolt: A rebellion of people against established authority and power.

Resident: The designation of a representative of the Governor General who lived in a state which was not under direct British rule.