

Revolt of 1857: The First War of Independence?

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Abstract

The dictionary meaning of Uprising is "an act of resistance or rebellion or a revolt." Most scholars have used Mutiny and insurrection interchangeably. Whether the revolt of 1857 was just another revolt in the long series of revolts against British authority or was it rightly called by some as a war of independence? Before we discuss that let us first examine the causes that led to this revolt. Reasons for the mutiny are still debatable in academic circles and politico-history discussions. However, it was not the first revolt against the established authority of the British, yet the impact it left on the masses makes it a topic of great deliberation.

Keywords: *Revolt of 1857, Independence, British.*

Introduction

A careful study of the programs and objectives of the revolt reveals its nature and character. The revolt of 1857 is a controversial subject in the historical studies. The programs and objectives of the revolt reveal that it was an attempt to overthrow British rule and attain freedom, but it did not conceive regarding making of a nation. The end of British rule was not linked with nation building process neither did it contain any futuristic progressive vision.

The initial phase of revolt started as a sepoy mutiny with only a handful of sepoys of Bengal regiment standing up against the British raj. The spark that ignited the fear of the sepoys was the rumour concerning the use of pig and cow fat as a lubricant in the newly introduced Enfield rifle. According to Professor Peter Marshall, the failure of the soldiers of Bengal regiment to imbibe the changes and on the other hand the availability of soldiers from Nepal and Punjab who were ready to serve the British interests overseas led

to induction of Sikhs into the Bengal regiment that created a sense of fear among the soldiers as a position in the army had become a status symbol for the soldiers which they did not want to lose at any cost.¹ "Cantonment after cantonment rebelled. When the soldiers refused to acknowledge British authority, the way was left open for disaffected princes and aristocrats, and for village and town people with grievances, to revolt alongside the soldiers."² Apparently, religion seems to be playing the pivot role in flaring up the revolt. But there were many other reasons of discontent simmering among the masses. 'The revolt of 1857 was much more than a mere product of sepoy discontent. The civil rebellion of the pre-mutiny and the mutiny periods were linked because these were "primarily anti-British, anti-colonial movements running through feudal channels."³

It was in reality a product of the character and policies of colonial rule, of the accumulated grievances of the people against the Company's administration and of their dislike for the foreign regime.⁴ Few of those who provided leadership to this revolt at local and regional level were: Mangal Pandey, a sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry fired the bullet that marked the beginning of the great uprising of 1857; Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi boldly opposed the expansionist policies of British concerning Indian states. The British did not allow her adopted son to succeed her late husband, Raja Ganagadhar Rao, instead they annexed the kingdom. She actively participated in the revolt; Kunwar Singh was yet another important leader from Bihar who played an important role in the Revolt of 1857; Abdul Muzaffar Muhammad Siraj-ud-din Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor was

proclaimed the Emperor of Hindustan following outbreak of revolt in Meerut in 1857; Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa Bajji Rao II assumed the leadership of troops at Kanpur and played a critical role in war against British; Ramchandra Pandurang Tope, a close friend of Nana Saheb led the campaign against the British in Bundelkhand following capture of Kanpur by the British forces when his friend was deprived of his father's pension; The Begum of Awadh, Hazrat Mahal was the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow, who was exiled to Calcutta by the Company, rose in revolt at Lucknow with the support of Nana Saheb and others; Nahar Singh, a staunch advocate of hindu-muslim unity was the ruler of Ballabgarh who played an important role in the revolt.⁵

There were many historians and scholars who called this revolt the first war of independence. The most prominent among them is Karl Marx who without any hesitation construed the struggle of Indians during 1857 as the first Indian war of independence.⁶ Likewise S.B. Chaudhury, an eminent historian of modern history has conceptualised the revolt as 'the first combined attempt of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power. This is a real, if remote, approach to the freedom movement of India of a later age.'⁷

J.L. Nehru in his work 'The Discovery of India' writing about the Great Revolt of 1857 wrote, "It was much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian independence."⁸ But at the same time calling it "a feudal outburst" contradicts his own statement of calling the revolt of 1857 a war of independence. While speaking about the role of feudal chiefs in the revolt Nehru spoke of "the lack of unity among the feudal chiefs and their lack of any constructive ideal or community of interest which is why he said that they had already played their role in history and there was no place for them in the future".⁹

Savarkar asserts that "the Revolution of 1857 was a test to see how far India had come towards unity, independence and popular power."¹⁰ How did the question of independence come up when there were no organised efforts by all the sections of the society? Did all those who stood up in revolt

shared a common purpose or objective? The answer is No. The rebellion on the part of few cannot be called as a first war of independence.

According to Dr R C Majumdar, "though there was no love lost between the British Government in India and the various local chiefs, the native numbers were almost invariably passive onlookers and in many cases, openly against the movement. Those natives who ultimately joined the revolt were forced by the actions of private Englishmen of the Government, and often by the threats of mutineering sepoys."¹¹ He shows how even then, jealousy and mutual suspicion among rival chiefs, feudal interests and communal feelings hampered a union of the 'rebel' forces.¹² "The character of the sepoy risings and the disturbance among the civil population were largely excited by religious sentiments, fanned by miscreants and goondas."¹³ V.D. Savarkar called it "a planned and organised political and military rising aimed at destroying the British power in India."¹⁴

To S.B. Chaudhuri, the revolt of 1857 was "a curious coming together of old feudal instincts and anti-alien patriotism. The latter was not yet of the pure advanced political type, as the leaven of feudal discontent was still strong. Yet the yearning for freedom, which was latent in these instincts stood out as the outward emblem of a national outburst against foreign rule."¹⁵ When he raised the question that "Who knows that the inception of the nationalist movement was not contained in the rising of 1857 after the fashion of the oak in the acorn?"¹⁶ he probably meant that the revolt if not a war of independence at the least provided a base for national movements later on.

Dr Sen, on the other hand, accepts that the rising of 1857 assumed a national character at least at certain places. He rightly points out that diverse factors operated in the growth of this feeling of national unity, such as feudal loyalty, religious feeling etc. But in many cases, this national movement assumed a very low character, disfigured by communal riots, unnecessary cruelties and excesses. He concluded that "nowhere did the sepoy's conduct conform to a common pattern." The native chiefs were led by motives of personal gain not by the nationalistic and democratic ideals of 19th century Liberal Europe and the

sepoys and their peasant associates often betrayed a medieval spirit in their demands on the British Government.¹⁷ Both Sen and Chaudhari agreed that the revolt was not pre-planned or concerted.

Conclusion

The British policies and rules had a colonial colour, having elements of exploitation that adversely affected the interests of various sections of the Indian society. There was a clash between British interests and the interest of the Indian masses at large. There had been a plethora of revolts before the revolt of 1857 but the social base was never so broad enough to culminate into a movement of such magnificent proportions. The civil rebellions that kept occurring before were suppressed by the British but never could they have anticipated a revolt of this scale. The discontent grew to the level that it busted and wiped out the British pride that they are the most powerful.

The revolt cannot be perceived in the light of the issue of greased cartridges only since it was inherent in the British imperial structure. Peasant and the tribal discontent and their protest represented significant aspect of traditional resistance against the British rule. They constitute very important component of the entire traditional struggle which took place before 1857. They acted as precursors to resistance on a larger scale in future. Revolt of 1857 in fact, symbolized culmination of traditional resistance against British oppression. Introduction of new Enfield Rifle in the army to be used with greased cartridges that were made of cow and pig meat did infuriate the sepoys enlisted in the Army. "The revolt had been long brewing, the greased cartridge only hastened it."¹⁸

Could this really be termed as a 'war of independence'? The aim and objective of this revolt was to free themselves from British oppression. Declaration of Bahadur Shah Zafar II as emperor symbolises the acknowledgement of central leadership. Mere giving reins in the hands of a weak ruler could in no way steer the revolt towards success. Due to the absence of pan-India approach to the revolt, it cannot rightly be called as the 'First

War of Independence'. Likes of Kunwar Singh fought for the local interest where few like Rani Lakshimibai had a regional interest. Thus, the inter-connectedness among the leaders of the revolt seems to be missing. Though anti-British sentiments provided a common ground of threat, misery, extermination, etc., yet there were few sections of the society that stayed away from the revolt.

It would be appropriate to sum up with the Official British opinion that the outbreak of 1857 had merely been a revolt of the Sepoys, infuriated because of the outrage their religious beliefs (grease cartridge), joined in by the discontented feudal elements and the 'goondah sections' of the civil population.

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