

The First War of Independence 1857 and its Impacts

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ABSTRACT

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the East India Company had established direct control over a very large part of India. Even areas which were ruled by the Indian Princes were indirectly under British Control. The Mughal Empire, by this time, existed only in name. The Emperor had neither territory nor power. The British rule had alienated all sections of the Indian society. The different sections of society thus expressed their anger and hatred for the British rule through protests and revolts, which culminated in the great uprising of 1857. Lord Canning was the Governor General of India at that time. The rule of the English East India Company had changed the life of the Indians in many ways. These were the reasons of the revolt.

KEYWORDS: East India Company, Revolts, Indian Society, Governor General of India

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I. INTRODUCTION

The process of the British conquest of India and the consolidation of British rule was accompanied by resentment among the Indians.

The **Revolt of 1857**, also known as the **First War of Indian Independence**, the **Sepoy Mutiny**, or the **Indian Rebellion of 1857**, was a major uprising against the rule of the **British East India Company**. It began on **10 May 1857** in **Meerut** when Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the British army rebelled. The revolt soon spread to various parts of northern and central India.

Although it was eventually suppressed by the British, the revolt marked a **turning point in Indian history**. It was the first large-scale and united resistance against foreign rule, involving soldiers, rulers, peasants, and civilians.

The rebellion was caused by a mix of **political, economic, military, social, and religious grievances**. One of the immediate triggers was the introduction of **Enfield rifle cartridges**, rumored to be greased with cow and pig fat—deeply offensive to both Hindus and Muslims.

The revolt brought an end to the rule of the East India Company and led to **direct British rule over India** under the Crown. Though it did not succeed in overthrowing British power, it sowed the seeds of **nationalism and future independence movements** in India.

II. REVOLTS BEFORE THE GREAT UPRISING

Revolts by the rulers and Zamindars

- Poligars in Tamil Nadu
- Peasant Revolts
- Chuar Revolt in Bihar and Bengal
- Moplah Revolt in Malabar

Tribal Revolts

- Bhils in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra
- Mundas in Bihar

Kols in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa

- Gonds and Khonds in Orissa
- Kolis in Maharashtra
- Mers in Rajasthan
- Santhals in Bihar and Bengal

Sepoy Revolts

- Sepoy Mutiny in Bengal

- Sepoy Mutiny in Vellore
- Sepoy Mutiny in Barrackpore

Religious Revolts

- Sanyasis in Bengal
- Wahabi Revolt in Bareilly
- Revolt of Farazis in Bengal

III. CAUSES OF 1ST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1857

The growing discontent in the country was due to the expansion of the British dominions at an alarming rate.

- Political Causes
- Socio Religious Causes
- Economic Causes
- Military Causes
- Immediate Causes

POLITICAL CAUSES

- **Doctrine of Lapse:** Introduced by Lord Dalhousie; denied adopted heirs the right to rule. States like **Jhansi, Satara, Nagpur, and Udaipur** were annexed.
- **Annexation of Awadh (Oudh)** in 1856: Justified on grounds of misgovernance, it deeply hurt the sentiments of nobles and soldiers.
- **Disrespect to Indian rulers:** Traditional rulers were either removed or reduced to pensioners without power.

ECONOMIC CAUSES

- **Heavy taxation and revenue settlements** ruined peasants and zamindars.
- **Destruction of local industries** due to British policies favoring imports from Britain.
- **Job losses** among artisans and soldiers, many of whom joined the revolt.
- **Confiscation of land** from landlords and traditional elites.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CAUSES

- **Interference in social customs:** Reforms like abolition of Sati, legalization of widow remarriage, etc., were viewed as attacks on traditional values.
- **Fear of religious conversion** to Christianity by missionaries.
- **Introduction of Western education** and laws that Indians believed undermined their culture and religion.

MILITARY CAUSES

- **Discrimination in the army:** Indian soldiers (sepoys) were paid less than British soldiers,

faced poor promotion prospects, and were often treated with contempt.

- **Deployment in distant regions:** Sepoys were sent to fight in foreign lands (e.g., Burma) without extra pay or concern for religious customs.
- **Greased cartridge issue:** Introduction of the **Enfield rifle**, whose cartridges were rumored to be greased with **cow and pig fat**, offended both **Hindus and Muslims**.

IMMEDIATE CAUSE

- The **cartridge controversy:** Sepoys were ordered to bite open cartridges greased with cow/pig fat.
- **Mangal Pandey** attacked a British officer at Barrackpore (March 1857).
- On **May 10, 1857**, soldiers in **Meerut** revolted—this marked the **official beginning** of the uprising.

IV. THE OUTBREAK

The **Outbreak of 1857**, also known as the **Indian Rebellion of 1857**, the **First War of Indian Independence**, or the **Sepoy Mutiny**, was a major, but ultimately unsuccessful, uprising against the British East India Company. It marked a turning point in Indian history.

V. MAJOR EVENTS OF THE REBELLION

- **10 May 1857:** Mutiny begins in **Meerut**, spreads rapidly.
- **Delhi:** Rebels seize the city, proclaim **Bahadur Shah Zafar** as emperor.
- Uprisings spread to **Kanpur** (led by Nana Sahib), **Jhansi** (Rani Lakshmibai), **Lucknow** (Begum Hazrat Mahal), and **Bareilly** (Khan Bahadur Khan).
- Fierce battles with British forces follows
- **Mangal Pandey** is remembered as one of the **first martyrs** of the **Indian Rebellion of 1857** and a symbol of early resistance against British rule.
- On 29th March 1857 this day, at **Barrackpore**, **Mangal Pandey attacked British officers** — Lieutenant Baugh and Sergeant-Major Hewson.
- He **called fellow soldiers to revolt**, urging them to rise against the British.
- He was eventually overpowered, arrested, and **court-martialed**.

VI. MAJOR CENTERS OF THE REVOLT OF 1857

♀ Place	✂ Leader(s)	📄 Key Events
Meerut	Sepoys of the 3rd Cavalry	Outbreak began on 10 May 1857 . Sepoys rebelled, killed British officers, and marched to Delhi.
Delhi	Bahadur Shah Zafar (nominal leader)	Rebels proclaimed Bahadur Shah Zafar as emperor. British retook Delhi in September 1857.
Kanpur	Nana Sahib , Tantia Tope, Azimullah	Nana Sahib led the revolt. British surrendered but were later massacred. Kanpur was recaptured by the British.
Lucknow	Begum Hazrat Mahal , Birjis Qadir	Hazrat Mahal declared her son, Birjis Qadir , as ruler. Fierce fighting took place; British regained control in 1858.
Jhansi	Rani Lakshmibai	She led a heroic resistance. Died in battle in June 1858 while fighting the British.
Bareilly	Khan Bahadur Khan	Declared himself Nawab of Rohilkhand. Led the revolt until defeat by British forces.
Faizabad	Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah	A prominent religious leader who organized local resistance. Killed in battle.
Arrah (Bihar)	Kunwar Singh	80-year-old zamindar who led a strong guerrilla campaign against the British.
Banaras	Local sepoy and civilians	Revolt suppressed early with strong British retaliation.

VII. EFFECTS OF THE REVOLT OF 1857

The Revolt of 1857 had **far-reaching consequences**, even though it was ultimately unsuccessful. It **shook the foundations of British rule in India** and led to major political, administrative, military, and social changes.

1. End of the East India Company

The **British East India Company** was **abolished** in 1858.

- The British Crown took **direct control** of India through the **Government of India Act, 1858**.
- A **Secretary of State for India** was appointed in London, assisted by a **Council of India**.

2. Beginning of the British Raj

- India became a formal **British colony** under Queen Victoria.
- In 1876, **Queen Victoria** was declared **Empress of India**.
- The British government promised to respect the **religions and customs of Indians** to avoid future unrest.

3. Military Reorganization

- The **Indian army** was **restructured** to reduce the number of Indian soldiers and increase the number of British troops.
- The **“Divide and Rule”** policy was enforced by recruiting soldiers based on region, caste, and religion to prevent unity.
- Important posts were reserved for **British officers only**.

4. Changes in Administrative Policies

- The British abandoned the **Doctrine of Lapse** and avoided interfering with **princes and traditional institutions**.
- Indian princes were now treated as **allies** of the British Crown.
- A policy of **non-interference in religion and customs** was announced.

5. Rise of Nationalism

- The revolt planted the **seeds of Indian nationalism**.
- Though it failed, it inspired future generations and became known as the **First War of Indian Independence**.
- Led to the rise of **organized political movements**, eventually culminating in the formation of the **Indian National Congress in 1885**.

6. Increased Racial Discrimination

- The British now **mistrusted Indians more deeply**.
- Policies became more **repressive**.
- A clear divide was established between **rulers (British)** and **ruled (Indians)**.

Summary Table

Effect Area	Description
Political	End of East India Company; start of British Crown rule
Administrative	Government of India Act 1858; policy shifts to prevent revolts
Military	Army reorganized; more British troops; divide and rule strategy
Social	Less interference in customs; increased racial discrimination
Nationalism	Inspired future freedom fighters and national movements

VIII. CONCLUSION

The **Revolt of 1857** was a landmark event in Indian history. Though it was **unsuccessful in overthrowing British rule**, it marked the **beginning of a national awakening**. The British brutally suppressed the revolt, and by **mid-1858**, peace was restored. However, the uprising deeply shook the British government, forcing it to **change the way India was governed**.

The **East India Company was abolished**, and India came under **direct rule of the British Crown**. The revolt also exposed the **deep discontent** among Indians due to British policies and laid the foundation for **organized freedom movements** in the future. Leaders like **Rani Lakshmibai, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Tantia Tope, and Mangal Pandey** became **symbols of resistance and patriotism**.

In conclusion, while the Revolt of 1857 did not achieve independence, it was the **first major expression of Indian unity and resistance**, and it inspired future generations to fight for freedom.

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