

# The Great Uprising of 1857: An Exploration of Its Causes and Nature

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## ABSTRACT

A mighty revolt broke out in 1857 which was the result of atrocities by Britishers in terms of economic exploitation, administrative innovations and cultural discrimination against the Indians which adversely affected the masses ranging from brahmins to a small peasant. Earlier too, there were number of small uprisings from time to time in different parts of country like in Vellore (1806), Barrackpore (1824), Ferozepur (1842) followed by many mutinies. Millions of peasants, artisans and soldiers fought bravely and the year witnessed armed rebellion in parts of central and northern parts of India, which shook the British empire to its very foundation.

In this project, we will learn about various causes which lead to discontent among the Indians and united different groups together to fight against a common enemy, the British. There were causes affecting different sections of society and in different aspects of life. The nature of the revolt is also a topic of discussion and in this project, the opinions of different scholars, writers and historians will be presented regarding the type of revolt it was on the basis of involvement of which community or section of society.

The outcome of this project will be the actual nature of the revolt after studying the fundamental social and economic changes that upset the peasants during the first century of Company's rule, which turned into the causes of the Revolt of 1857.

**Keywords:** Greased Cartridges, Doctrine of Lapse, Dalhousie, sepoy mutiny, Awadh, Enfield rifle, infantry, annexations, princely states.

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## I. POLITICAL CAUSES

The East India Company's greedy policy of 'EFFECTIVE CONTROL', policy of aggrandizement, gradual extinction of the native Indian states accompanied by broken pledges and promises was visible in the policies of 'SUBSIDIARY ALLIANCE' by Lord Wellesley and 'DOCTRINE OF LAPSE' by Lord Dalhousie. Punjab, Pegu, Sikkim had been annexed by the 'Right of Conquest'.

Hindu princes were denied the right of succession. Regal titles of Nawab of Carnatic and Tanjore were abolished. Peshwa Baji Rao II's adopted son, Nana Saheb's pension was stopped which was paid to his father, amounting to ₹8 lakhs per annum and was forced to live in Kanpur, far away from his family at Poona. He even was asked to vacate his Bithur estate.

Muslim feelings had also been grievously hurt and they thought that the English wanted to humble the House of Timur. Initially, the Company derived many benefits from the Mughals and even their coins bore the name of the Mughal Emperor. Subsequently, the company adopted a step-motherly attitude towards the Emperor and stopped offering gifts and presents to Bahadur Shah Zafar. In 1849, the Mughals were humbled down when Dalhousie announced that the successors of Bahadur Shah Zafar II have to move to Qutab, on the outskirts of Delhi and leave the Red Fort at Delhi. (Chandra, 144) Lord Dalhousie refused to recognise Bahadur Shah's eldest son, Jawan-Bakht as the crown-prince because of his anti-British feelings. He even was not in a favour of retaining imperium to Bahadur Shah Zafar, an old Mughal Emperor but recognized conditionally the succession of Prince Faqir-ul-din. But after his death in 1856, Lord Canning announced that further successors would have to renounce the regal title and ancestral Mughal palaces. Their monthly allowance was reduced from 1 lakh to 15,000 rupees only.

Due to the 'absentee sovereignty' of the British rule, people's mind worked against the British. The Pathans and Mughals ruled the country by settling here and becoming the part of India. The revenues collected were spent in this country only. On the other hand, the Britishers ruled India from England, from a distance of thousands of miles and was drained for her wealth. (Grover, 193) The collapse of rulers, the erstwhile aristocracy, also adversely affected those sections of the Indian society which derived their sustenance from cultural and religious pursuits. (Ahir, 169-70)

## Subsidiary Alliance

This system was initiated by Lord Wellesley, Governor General of India (1798-1805) which states that the allying Indian states would have to station a British force permanently within his territory and would have to pay a subsidy for its maintenance. The ruler would also have to post a British resident at his court. The ruler could

not employ any other European in his service without consulting the company. Neither he can go to war nor can maintain a treaty with any other Indian ruler or state. In return of these, British would defend the allied state from his enemies and would not interfere in the internal affairs of that state.

The first to accept this was the Nizam of Hyderabad (1798 and 1800). Then ruler of Mysore and ruler of Tanjore (1799), Nawab of Awadh and the Peshwa (1801), Bhonsle Raja of Berar (1803), Sindhia (1804), the Rajput states of Jodhpur, Jaipur, Macheri, Bundi and the ruler of Bharatpur (1818) joined the alliance. The Holkars were the last Marathas to accept the alliance in 1818. (Ahir, 122)

### **Annexation of Awadh**

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was the ruler of Awadh having Lucknow the capital city. Awadh Nawabs since 1765 were very faithful towards the British. The State was rich and resourceful and served the British with money and resources from time to time. The annexation of Awadh, which had been a faithful ally of the Company and was known for their loyalty towards the British, on 13th February, 1856 by Lord Dalhousie on the grounds of bad administration had an adverse effect and was widely resented in Awadh in particular. Dalhousie had been long planning to seize Awadh because of its limitless prosperity, commercial success and revenue potential. It was already brought under Subsidiary Alliance which resulted in continuous maladministration. The masses suffered from heavy taxation by Nawab and illegal exactions by his officials and Taluqdars. British government levied heavy charges for maintenance of subsidiary troops resulting in chronic bankruptcy of the treasury.

First, Lord Dalhousie directed Sleeman, a resident in Awadh, to make tour throughout the state and make a report about the general conditions of the people throughout the state. He submitted a document reporting the anarchical situation of the state and merciful condition of the people of Awadh. He justified the annexation of Awadh on the pretext of "*the good of the governed*". It shocked the people and created an atmosphere of rebellion in the Company's army as about 75,000 of them were recruited from here only. These Sepoys had earlier helped the British conquer the rest of India due to lack of all India feeling. But they did possess regional and local patriotism and would never want a foreign or alien rule on their home soil. (Chandra, 142-3) Sir James Outram had already cautioned Dalhousie by saying that, "every agricultural family in Oudh, perhaps without exception, ...sends one of its members into the British army." Sleeman too warned Dalhousie that this annexation would cost British power more than the cost of ten kingdoms and might lead to a sepoy mutiny! As predicted, this annexation shook the trustworthiness of the sepoys and was the proof that now they did not need to be loyal towards the British.

The Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was deported to Calcutta. His unceremonious removal excited his subjects and this annexation did not only affect the Nawab and his family but also the aristocracy attached to the royal court. These deposed nobles and princes offered leadership to the rebels to avenge their loss of prestige and power and thus provided legitimacy to the revolt in their respective regions. (Bandopadhyay, 171-2)

### **Doctrine of Lapse**

This doctrine presumed that the Company was supreme power in India, enjoying the subordination of all the existing native states. It was now obligatory for the issueless ruler of any native state to get a sanction of the company before adopting sons to inherit the rulership of the respective state. According to the Court of Directors, such a sanction was only a special favour which they can retain on their own will. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India's policy of annexation implementing this doctrine rigidly like no other administrator, derecognising the adopted sons of the deceased princes as the legal heirs, was considered as the "Lapse of all Morals" by Sir Charles Napier, one of the architects of British India. Malleon has stated that Indians felt that British were "playing the wolf in the garb of the lamb." (Grover, 192) The adopted heirs could only inherit the private property of the deceased ruler. The British stated that this was based on Hindu law of succession and Indian norms and customs but Hindu Law seemed to be inclusive on this point and instances of annexations on the account of 'lapse' were rare. In the words of Dalhousie, "*I hold that on all occasions where heirs natural shall fail, the territory should be made lapse and adoption should not be permitted, excepting in those cases in which some strong political reason may render it expedient to depart from the general rule.*" (Agarwal, 66)

Likewise, the company in 1820 acquired a few petty Cis-Sutlej states. In 1853, Raghoji Bhonsle of Nagpur died without a male heir. Dalhousie immediately annexed the State. Satara in Maharashtra (1848), Sambalpur, Jaitpur (Bundelkhand), Baghat of Punjab hilly region, Himachal Pradesh (1850), Udaipur of Sargujas (1852), Sambalpur (Orissa) and finally Jhansi (1853) fell to this policy in quick succession. This led to the formation of rebels who were the feudal lords, disgruntled by the continuous interference of the British in the traditional system of inheritance. In the case of Jhansi, the proud Rani Lakshmi Bai, widow of Maharaja Gangadhar Rao Newalkar of Jhansi, wanted her adopted son, Anand Rao, to succeed her deceased husband. On refusal, she took arms against the British in the revolt.

However, not everyone in the British cabinet supported Dalhousie's actions. Sir George Clerk and Colonel Low contended that the dependent states were beneficial in affording employment for them and their annexation would result in discontentment among the masses. This would in turn alarm the neighbouring states' rulers. Many such personalities like Lord Stanley, Sir Henry Russel, Malcom and Elphinisten expressed their disapproval.

In these eight years, Dalhousie annexed some quarter million square miles of the territory. Thus, Nana Sahib assumed leadership in Kanpur; Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, in Lucknow; Khan Bahadur Khan in Rohilkhand; and Rani Lakshmi Bai in Jhansi along with her companion Jhalkari Bai. (Bandopadhyay, 172) They all assumed leadership in their respective regions against the British rule.

### **ECONOMIC CAUSES**

One of the most important causes of the revolt was the economic exploitation and complete destruction of traditional fabric. Numerous experiments of land revenue settlement made the condition of farmers miserable. The ruthlessness of the exploitation was so much that famines became common. A vast majority of peasants, artisans, and handicraftsmen, a large number of traditional zamindars and chiefs were impoverished. Due to this, the peasants took loans from money lenders/traders at usurious interest rates, the latter often evict the former on non-payment of dues. The sepoys were peasants in uniform. After Awadh's annexation, they were anxious about the declining conditions of peasants due to summary settlements. The taluqdars of Awadh were the hardest hit. Asoka Mehta says, "Out of the 25,543 villages included in their estates at the time of the annexation of the kingdom, 13,640 paying a revenue of Rs. 35,06,519 were settled with taluqdars, while 11,903 villages paying Rs. 32,08,319 were settled with persons other than taluqdars...the taluqdars had lost half their villages, some had lost their all". (Grover, 194) Before the revolt, 14,000 petitions were filed by sepoys about the hardships relating to the revenue system. The peasants were hard hit by the high revenue demands of the state as in Awadh. The economic decline of peasantry found expression in 12 major famines and various minor famines from 1770 to 1857. They were the result of bad administration and natural calamities such as drought. Same occurred in North Western Provinces too, where Mahalwari Settlement had been made. The village proprietors were not satisfied because of high land revenue demand. The owner-cultivators felt the burden of over-assessment and the pressure was extraordinary due to increased public sales of landed rights. The places where agriculture was insecure, these pressures drove the peasants into debt. The common man now had to pay higher taxes, land revenue and additional taxes on articles of food, houses, ferries, opium, and justice.

The British policy of discouragement of Indian handicrafts and promotion of British goods forced the highly skilled Indian craftsmen to look for alternate sources of employment which was too hard to find and rarely existed. The destruction of Indian handicrafts was accompanied by the development of modern industries. Karl Marx (1853) said, "It was the Britisher intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel. England began with depriving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons." (Ahir, 169) Indigo trade was highly profitable for the British but the conditions were inhuman under which the peasants had to work. British officials chose the fields on which the peasants were forced to cultivate only Indigo, and if they planted anything else, their crops were destroyed and cattle were carried off as punishment.

The English East India Company earlier purchased Indian textiles and paid for it in gold resulting in Drain of English wealth. So, with the coming of Industrial Revolution, they now purchased raw cotton, made clothes on machines and exported these machine goods to India. British imposed high tariff duties on Indian goods and attracted low tariffs on imports of British goods into India. By mid-19th century, exports of cotton and silk textiles came to an end. Refusal to impose protective duties against machine made goods from Britain proved too destructive for Indian manufacture and mercantile class was deliberately crippled. This made their hand-made goods (which were expensive) uneconomical to produce. By the use of quo warranto, land rights of zamindars were forfeited resulting in loss of status for them in the village. The zamindars were harassed by the demands of higher land revenue. The resented their loss even more when they were replaced by outsiders, officials, merchants and moneylenders. Meanwhile, in Awadh, estates of 21,000 taluqdars got confiscated and they were without a source of income, "unable to work, ashamed to beg, condemned to penury". The INAM COMMISSION (1852) led to the confiscation of 20,000 estates when their landlords failed to produce evidence like title deeds. These lands were then sold to the highest bidders by public auction, which were purchased by merchants and money lenders who again exploited the peasants.

### **MILITARY CAUSES**

From 1820s British introduced army reforms to initiate a more universalized military culture for which, they began to curtail some caste privileges and pecuniary benefits. That's why, Indian sepoys had their grievances and dissatisfaction. They were unhappy with the emoluments given to them as compared to their British counterparts. They were lodged and fed in a far worse manner. Their foreign service allowance (Bhatta) was also

discontinued when serving in Sindh or Punjab. They all were already hopeless with the annexation of Awadh as they had to pay higher taxes on the land his family held in Awadh which adversely affected their purse inflaming their feelings. There was racial discrimination in the matter of promotion and privileges. They had a little chance of rise in rank or promotion. No Indian Sepoy could rise higher than a subedar, drawing 60 to 70 rupees a month. British historian, T.R. Holmes says, "Though he might give signs of military genius of a Hyder, he knew that he could never attain the pay of an English subaltern and that the rank to which he might attain, after some 30 years of faithful service, would not protect him from the insolent dictation of an ensign fresh from England." A wide gulf existed between the officers and the sepoys, who were treated with contempt by their British officials. The sepoy is "esteemed an inferior creature...is sworn at...treated roughly...spoken of as a 'nigger'...addressed as a 'suar' or pig". (Chandra, 146)

There were restrictions on wearing caste and sectarian marks, beards or turbans. Proselytising activities of the Chaplains were interpreted as interference in their religious affairs, by the sepoys who were generally conservative in nature. For Hindus, crossing the sea was considered as unholy and loss to the caste. But in 1856, Lord Canning passed the GENERAL SERVICE ENLISTMENT ACT which decreed that all the recruits (future) in the Bengal army had to give an undertaking for serving anywhere in the world their services might require them. Their refusal to serve in Burma, Sind or Afghanistan met with reprisals and dismissals. Sepoys who were unfit for the foreign service were not allowed to retire with pension but were posted for duty in the cantonments. The POST OFFICE ACT of 1854 withdrew the privilege of free postage enjoyed by the sepoys. The sepoys yearned for good old days when they were awarded for their meritorious deeds by their rulers and were bestowed with prices, jagirs, whereas now the victories in Sind and Punjab had brought worse days for them. Also, there was a deficiency of good officers, most of whom were employed in higher administrative posts in newly acquired states and frontier. The distribution of troops was also faulty. To suppress the mutiny of Bengal (1764), the authorities blew away 30 sepoys from the mouths of guns. The Vellore mutiny (1806) was crushed terribly with violence and several hundred men dying. In 1824, a Regiment of sepoys at Barrackpore was disbanded as they refused to go to Burma by sea-route. Its unarmed men were fired upon from artillery and sepoy leaders were hanged. A Hindu and a Muslim subedar were shot dead for giving discontent in the army. The number of British troops in India was 1 in 4,000. Dalhousie recommended that more Britishers should be recruited in the army but this could not come through. Thus, it made it easier for Indian soldiers to take up arms against the British.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE CAUSES**

The administrative machinery of the East India Company was 'inefficient and insufficient'. The system eliminated the middlemen by establishing direct contact with the peasants. Commoners were hard hit by the prevalence of corruption at the lower levels of administration. Corruption was evident among the petty officials, police, and lower law courts. William Edwards (1859), a British official wrote that police were "a scourge to the people" and that "their oppressions and exactions from one of the chief grounds of dissatisfaction with our government". (Chandra, 141) The complexity of the judicial system enabled the rich to oppress the poor and petty officials exploited this opportunity to extract money from the pockets of ryots and zamindars. Flogging, torture and jailing of the cultivators on non-payment of taxes and revenues or for arrears in rent was not a rare sight.

The European juries acquitted European criminals with light or no punishment. Such discrimination rankled in the minds of Indians like a festering stone. Exclusion from well-paid higher services and posts in administration was another problem which was faced by middle- and upper-class families of the north. The gradual disappearance of Indian states deprived those Indians who were employed in those states, of their means of livelihood. The Indian aristocracy was deprived of all power and position as high posts were only reserved for Europeans. Sir Thomas Munro pleaded the employment of Indians by saying, "...none has treated them (native) with so much scorn as we; ...as unworthy of trust, as incapable of honestly and as fit to be employed only where we can't do without them. It seems to be not only ungenerous, but impolite, to debase the character of the people fallen under our dominion..." (Grover, 193) Indeed, it is the view of many historians that the rampant corruption we see now in India is the legacy of the Company's rule. Also, the character of British rule imparted a foreign or alien look to the administration system, in the eyes of Indians, a kind of absentee sovereignty.

### **SOCIAL CAUSES**

The British supremacy led to the ruin of those people who made their living from cultural pursuits. The Indian rulers had been patrons of art, music and literature and had supported the scholars and religious preachers. The sudden withdrawal of the patronage due to the displacement of these rulers by the East India Company led to the impoverishment of those who depended on it. The dissolution of Awadh and army threw out thousands of nobles, gentlemen and officials, along with their retainers, officers and soldiers which created an atmosphere of unemployment in every peasant's home.

For Indians, the British remained aliens and perpetual foreigners. There was no social link or communication between the two. Language, food and clothing, traditional customs, religion- everything was



different. Unlike previous foreign conquerors, they did not mix with the masses, not even with the upper-class Indians and remained “English” in their manners. Instead, they were filled with racial superiority and treated Indians with arrogance and contempt. They looked upon Indians as pariahs. They dubbed Hindus as barbarians with hardly any trace of culture and civilization, while Muslims as bigots, cruel, and faithless. European officers and soldiers on their hunting sprees were often guilty of indiscriminate criminal assaults on Indians. Sayyid Ahmad Khan wrote, “Even natives of the highest rank never came into the presence of officials but with an inward fear and trembling.” (Chandra, 142) Likewise, the Indians refused to accept these foreigners as their beneficiaries and looked upon their every action with suspicion. They had thus a vague anti-British feeling. Conservative religious and social sentiments of the people got hurt when certain social reforms were undertaken by the British on the advice of Indian reformers. Raja Ram Mohan Roy led to the abolition of the custom of Sati (1829), in the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck. This measure might appear to us just but was highly offensive and insulting to the Hindus back then.

Other reforms include the legalization of widow remarriage, and the opening of Western Education to girls which in turn appeared to Indians as undue interference of British in their social and religious domain. The British messed with the education system of the day by keeping the people backward and illiterate to hamper forward and progressive thinking in the minds of Indians. The introduction of railways was looked upon as a deliberate attempt of the British to disrupt the social order. People criticised it as people of all castes were allowed to travel in the same compartment. Moreover, the Indians were not allowed to travel in the first-class compartment.

Thus, the Indians were filled with the desire of freedom and liberty from the British bondage. Both the soldiers and the civilians were shocked to witness the treacherous growth of the company from being a trading enterprise to being the rulers of India. The company which began their career as the agent of Mughals now robbed them of all their powers. There was a general belief that the Company’s rule is destined to end exactly 100 years after the Battle of Plassey of 1757.

## **RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CAUSES**

British rule endangered their religion. This fear was mainly due to the activities of Christian missionaries who were “*seen everywhere- in schools...hospitals...prisons and...market places*”. These missionaries made violent and vulgar attacks on the public who was either Hindu or Muslim, by saying against their religion. They openly ridiculed and criticised the long-cherished customs of people and followed the British flag in India. These missionaries were moreover provided police protection. The actual conversions made by them was a proof of threat to their religion which was also strengthened by the acts of government. In 1850, it enacted a law enabling a Christianity convert to inherit his ancestral property. Both Civil and military officials encouraged missionary propaganda and provided Christianity instruction in schools and even in jails. They used to abuse the very names of Ram and Mohammad. Major Edwards had declared that, “*the Christianization of India was to be the ultimate end of our continued possession of it.*” (Grover, 194) Religious sentiments were hurt by the policy of taxing lands belonging to temples and mosques and priests or charitable institutions which were exempted from taxation by earlier rulers. Brahmins and Muslim families were aroused to anger as they were depended on these lands. Idolatry was denounced, Hindu Gods and Goddesses ridiculed and Hindu superstitions dubbed as ignorance. With the conversion to Christianity and presence of missionaries, the rumours about mixing cow and pig bone dust with flour also fitted perfectly into a conspiracy theory. The British government made a law, RELIGIOUS DISABILITIES ACT of 1856, which modified Hindu customs such as declaring a change in religion did not debar a son from inheriting the property of his ‘heathen’ father.

The dual religious policy of English in India was first, to stop any kind of material aid to Indian institutions and forbid the imparting of religious instructions in state schools under the cloak of “secularism”; and second, to provide encouragement to missionaries to preach the tenets of Christ. The army bands were infiltrated by ‘missionary colonels’ and ‘Padri Lieutenant’. Those who embraced Christianity were favoured with easy promotions.

In this environment, even the railways and steamships began to be looked upon as indirect instruments for conversion. The telegraph strings were regarded as accursed that strangled them. Even educational offices were seen and styled as ‘*Shaitani Daftars*’. Community ties among Gurjars or Jats, Rajputs or Sayyids, became major factors in determining the effectiveness of the rebellion. Perhaps, the only common trait which joined all the layers of rural society together was the suspicion of British rule, allegedly threatening their religion.

## **INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN EVENTS**

This revolt coincided with many events from outside of India in which British forces were defeated and suffered many losses. It lowered the moral of the British army. These were – the FIRST AFGHAN WAR (1838-42), PUNJAB WARS (1845-49), and the CRIMEAN WARS (1854-56). In 1855-56, the Santhal tribesmen of Bihar and Bengal rose up, armed with axes, bows and arrows, and revealed the potential of a popular uprising by temporarily sweeping away the British rule from their region. (Ahir, 170) These wars had obvious psychological

repercussions on the minds of Indians who now believed that they had struck the right hour and had reasonable chances of success and it broke the myth that British was invincible. Though the British finally suppressed the rebellions and Santhal uprising, the reversals they suffered revealed that they could be defeated by a strong will, determined fighting spirit, even by an Asian army as they are not that strong. Indian soldiers had a feeling that the British were in difficulty and the safety of her Indian Empire depended on them solely. Places of strategic importance like Delhi and Allahabad had no British armies and were fully held by Indian soldiers. Besides, England was engaged in several wars outside India such as the Persian (Iranian) War and the Chinese War. They were, therefore, determined to strike at them at a suitable time.

### **IMMEDIATE CAUSE**

By 1857, all the materials for mass upheaval were ready, only a spark was needed for the fire. In late January, in a place called Dum Dum near Calcutta, rumours started circulating among the sepoys that the cartridges of new Enfield Rifle, which were lately introduced as a replacement of old 'Brown Bess' musket, has been greased with fat of cow and pig. The cartridges had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off before loading it into the rifle and this confirmed the old suspicion of the sepoys about the conspiracy of Britishers to convert their faith. Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys were enraged as cow was holy and sacred for Hindus and pig was taboo for Muslims. But the sepoys refused to carry out the order due to which on May 9, they were disarmed, 85 of them were stripped of their uniforms and clapped in prison (sentenced for 10 years), their hands and legs fettered. This blinded the sepoys in fury and they stormed the prison and emptied it by setting all prisoners free on May 10. Open firing was started by English soldiers which was returned with matching ferocity resulting in loss of heavy toll of lives. (Choudhuri, 9)

At once, a denial was issued by the military authorities without investigating into the matter. Subsequently, the enquiries proved that *"the fat of cows and oxen really had been used at Woolwich arsenal"* (Grover, 196). This rumour was not entirely devoid of truth and spread like a wildfire in different cantonments of army across the country. Immediately, there production was stopped and various concessions were given to allay their fear but their trust could never be restored. These slight concessions proved of no avail. It was also argued that the company is playing the role of Aurangzeb and its high time for the sepoys to play the part of Shivaji.

### **Onset of the Revolt**

According to some historians, a great deal of planning was done for the commencement of revolt. Few months before the revolt, there were instances of chappatis and red lotuses being circulated in many villages by wandering sanyasis and fakirs. Perhaps, it was a secret message to the people. Also, many secret messages were encoded in the lotus flowers.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry at Berhampore (West Bengal) was disbanded in March 1857 as it refused to use the newly introduced Enfield Rifle and broke out in mutiny in February 1857. Mangal Pande, a young sepoy of 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry, went a step further and fired at the sergeant major, a European officer of his unit at Barrackpore and his comrades refused to arrest him when ordered by their European superiors. They all were soon apprehended, court martialled and hanged on April 8 while his regiment was disbanded in May. The 7<sup>th</sup> Awadh Regiment which defied its officers on May 3 met with a similar fate.

The explosion came at Meerut on 24<sup>th</sup> April when 90 men of 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry refused to accept the greased cartridges. This led to a series of events which eventually resulted in unfoldment of the banner of revolt. In the days following, incidents of disobedience, incendiarism and arson were reported from army cantonments in Ambala, Lucknow and Meerut. The mutiny set off for Delhi, and gathered force rapidly, soon embracing a vast area from Punjab in the north and Narmada in the south to Bihar in the east and Rajputana in the west. (Ahir, 172)

### **NATURE OF THE REBELLION**

The suppression of the revolt of 1857 marked the end of one of the important phases of the freedom struggle. However, a question is often raised whether it was a 'War of Independence' or merely a 'Sepoy mutiny'. There are many views on the nature which differ among them. The revolt was for long mistaken as just a sepoy mutiny of Bengal army but it was indeed joined by the distressed rural society of North India. The revolt of 1857 is very difficult to categorise.

It was a mere 'sepoy mutiny' according to some British historians and civil unrest being the secondary phenomenon, which occurred as the unruly elements took advantage of the breakdown of law and order, like Sir John Seeley, *"a wholly unpatriotic and selfish Sepoy mutiny with no native leadership and no popular support"*. (Ahir, 179) However, it is not a complete as the events involved many sections of civilians and not just the sepoy as their discontentment was just one cause of the revolt.

Dr. K. Datta considers it as *"a military outbreak, which was taken advantage of by certain discontented princes and landlords, whose interests have been affected by the new political order."* It was *"never all-Indian in character, but was localised, restricted and poorly organised"*. (Ahir, 179) The movement was marked by the

nonattendance of consistency and unity of resolution among the various section of rebels. S.N. Sen too argued that the lawless elements took an upper hand when the administration collapsed. R.C. Majumdar too had identical thoughts and wrote that the revolt began as a military upheaval but ended up being an outbreak of civil population and mob violence which was sometimes organised by self-seeking localised leaders.

In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, V.D. Savarkar in his book, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* interpreted the revolt as “*planned war of independence*”, a war fought for “*swadharma and swaraj*”, and was inspired by the patronizing model of self-rule by Indians through a nationalist upsurge. Dr. S.N. Sen in his *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* considered it as having begun as a fight for religion but ending as a war of Independence. S.B. Chaudhuri wrote, “*First War of Independence it was certainly was, as in the whole canvas of the recorded history of India it would be difficult to find a parallel to the gigantic anti-foreign combine of all classes of people and of many provinces of India.*” (Ahir, 181) Even this view has been questioned by many who say that some earlier uprisings too have seriously affected in throwing off the foreign yoke, but have not received the same kind of popularity and attention.

Jawaharlal Nehru considered it as feudal uprising with some nationalistic elements, in his book, *Discovery of India*. M.N. Roy quotes that the revolt was a last-ditch stand of feudalism against commercial capitalism. R.P. Dutt also say it as a revolt of peasantry against foreign rule and also the defence of the old feudal order. Marxist historians interpret it as a struggle of soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign imperialism and indigenous landlordism. (Ahir, 180)

Some other views like those of L.E.R. Rees and T.R. Holmes stated the revolt as a war of fanatic religionists against Christians and a conflict between civilization and barbarism. Some contemporaries believe that it was wholly a Muslim conspiracy to restore the Mughal empire. The revolt had seeds of nationalism and anti-imperialism. But it is doubtful that all sections of society participated in the revolt for the same cause; each had their personal interest to protect. Dr. Sen points out that mainly the minority, with or without the active support from the general public, are the centre of national revolutions. From this point of view, this rebellion can claim a national character. In 1965, Thomas Metcalf wrote, “*there is a widespread agreement that it was a something more than a sepoy mutiny, but something less than a national revolt.*” (Bandopadhyay, 176) The popular character was just limited to the upper India and the regions or groups experiencing benefits from British remained loyal to them, so it was not “national”. C.A. Bayly argued that the rebels had differing motives. There was no predetermined plan or conspiracy like circulation of chapattis conveyed confusing messages. Thus, the rebellion was all negative.

It can be easily denied that there was a concept of Indian nation among the rebels. Peasant actions were local affairs bound by strictly defined territorial boundaries. Yet, now, the rebels were open to outside influence and there was greater communication, coordination between the territories, unlike the earlier peasant revolts. There was a common feature shared by all of them i.e., distaste for the British rule. Rebels everywhere fought for their *deen dharm* (faith and religion). Unknown to each other and separated by their differences, nonetheless, they pitied against the same enemy. In the words of Ranjit Guha, “*they took up arms to recover what they believed to have been their ancestral domains*”. (Bandopadhyay, 177) Rajat Ray is of the opinion that the rebels wanted themselves to be free from the foreign yoke. They wanted to go back to their old familiar ways but they didn't mean the Mughal state of 17<sup>th</sup> century. They wished to restore the decentralised political order of 18<sup>th</sup> century India where the rulers ruled with autonomy by acknowledging the Mughal Emperor as the source of political legitimacy. Thus, it would be definitely wrong to suppose that there was no planning involved in the revolt.

## II. CONCLUSION

Thus, after the analysis it can be concluded that the revolt was first major uprising against the British rule, though earlier too there were minor rebellions. This great rebellion was born out due many factors and diverse perceptions such as British style hostile social reforms, unforgiving land taxes, treatment given to rich landowners and princes, as well as scepticism about conversion to Christianity by the introduction of few modern ideas in the society. Due to these, many Indians (firstly sepoys) rose against the British but there was a good percentage of people who fought for the British. Though, it was not properly planned and executed due to different kinds of grievances of different sections of society, it was the first time when men and women; rich and poor; joined hands tried to rule out the British from their land.

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