

8th - When People Rebel II



The rebellion spreads: Soon the Revolt spread to other parts of northern and central India. The main centres were Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Arrah, Jhansi, Gwalior and Barrackpore. Revolts also took place in parts of Bengal, Rajasthan, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab. In many princely states, while the rulers remained loyal to the British, the soldiers revolted, or came close to it. The Revolt did not remain confined to the troops. The peasants and the artisans gave expression to their anger by attacking the moneylenders and the zamindars who had displaced them. It is now believed that in many battles, the common people far outnumbered the sepoys. The Revolt in Kanpur was led by Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II. Nana Saheb had been denied the pension that his foster-father, Baji Rao, Kunwar Singh successfully freed parts of Bihar.

Regiment after regiment mutinied and took off to join other troops at nodal points like Delhi, Kanpur and Lucknow. Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the late Peshwa Baji Rao who lived near Kanpur, gathered armed forces and expelled the British garrison from the city. He proclaimed himself Peshwa. He declared that he was a governor under Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. In Lucknow, Birjis Qadr, the son of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, was proclaimed the new Nawab. He too acknowledged the suzerainty of Bahadur Shah Zafar. His mother Begum Hazrat Mahal took an active part in organizing the uprising against the British. In Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai joined the rebel sepoys and fought the British along with Tantia Tope, the general of Nana Saheb. In Jhansi, the Revolt was led by Rani Lakshmi Bai. The refusal of the British to accept her adopted son as the rightful heir to the throne of Jhansi made her their sworn enemy. She joined forces with Tantia Tope and they captured Gwalior together. The British recaptured Gwalior after heavy fighting bravely on horseback. With the defeat of Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Revolt was almost completely crushed, though peace was not fully restored till 1859.

In the Mandla region of Madhya Pradesh, Rani Avantibai Lodhi of Ramgarh raised and led an army of four thousand against the British who had taken over the administration of her state. The British were greatly outnumbered by the rebel forces. They were defeated in a number of battles. This convinced the people that the rule of the British had collapsed for good and gave them the confidence to take the plunge and join the rebellion. A situation of widespread popular rebellion developed in the region of Awadh in particular. On 6 August 1857 we find a telegram sent by Lieutenant Colonel Tytler to his commander in chief expressing the fear felt by the British "our men are cowed by the numbers opposed to them and the endless fighting. Every village is held against us, the zamindars have risen to oppose us."

Many new leaders came up. For example, Ahmadullah Shah, a Maulvi from Faizabad, prophesied that the rule of the British would come to an end soon. He caught the imagination of the people and raised a huge force of supporters. He came to Lucknow to fight the British. In Delhi, a large number of Ghazis, religious warriors, came together to wipe out the white people. Bakht Khan, a soldier from Bareilly, took charge of a large force of fighters who came to Delhi. He became a key military leader of the rebellion. In Bihar, an old zamindar, Kunwar Singh, joined the rebel sepoys and battled with the British for many months. Leaders and fighters from across the land joined the fight.

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The Company Fights Back

The company decided to repress the revolt with all its might. It brought reinforcements from England. Passed new laws so that the rebels could be convicted with ease, and then moved into the storm centres of the revolt. Delhi was recaptured from the rebel forces in September 1857. The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar was tried in court and sentenced to life imprisonment. He and his wife begum Zinat Mahal were sent to prison in Rangoon in October 1858. Bahadur Shah Zafar died in Rangoon jail in November 1862. The recapture of Delhi, however did not mean that the rebellion died down after that. People continued to resist and battle the British. The British had to fight for two years to suppress the massive forces of popular rebellion. Lucknow was taken in march 1858 Rani Lakshmi Bai was defeated and killed in June 1858. A similar fate awaited Rani Avantibai, who after initial victory in Kheri, chose to embrace death when surrounded by the British on all sides. Tantia Toppe escaped to the jungles of central India and continued to fight a guerrilla war with the support of many tribal and peasant leaders. He was captured, tried and killed in April 1859.

Just as victories against the British had earlier encouraged rebellion, the defeat of rebel forces encouraged desertions. The British also tried their best to win back the loyalty of the people. They announced rewards for loyal landholders would be allowed to continue to enjoy traditional rights over their lands. Those who had rebelled were told that if they submitted to the British, and if they had not killed any white people, they would remain safe and their rights and claims to land would not be denied. Nevertheless, hundreds of sepoys, rebels, nawabs and rajas were buried and hanged.

The End of the Mughal Empire: Delhi was one of the first places to fall after the beginning of the Revolt. Reinforcements arrived for the besieged British army from Punjab. Under the command of General O'Neil, British troops launched a massacre in Delhi. Thousands of innocent people were killed. Bahadur Shah Zafar's sons were captured and killed, while the old emperor was exiled to Rangoon in Burma where he died after a few years.

Reasons for the Failure of the Revolt: How were just 10,000 British officers able to hold down a nation of millions of people. The uprising had certain inherent weaknesses that made success impossible.

Lack of Unity among the Indians: The Revolt did not involve the entire region or all the sections of Indian society. Many of the Indian rulers and the big zamindars refused to join the rebellion. Many, like Scindia of Gwalior, the Nizam of Hyderabad and Halkar of Indore, gave active support to the British. Most of South India and western Punjab stayed out of the rebellion. In areas of Punjab, the people were happy with the efficient administration of the British and did not join the Revolt. Most of the educated, westernized Indians also did not support the Revolt. In their eyes, India needed the British. They felt only the British could take India forward and rid it of the various social ills.

Lack of Nation Leader: The Revolt threw up several strong and independent leaders there was no single leader who could lead the groups. The leaders were mainly people who joined the Revolt because of the threat specially the British to their throne. Coming to the common people, like peasants the story was no different.

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The freedom fighters were inspired by the ideas of nationalism, liberty, equality and democracies the people in India still looked up religious their outdated ideas.

Lack of Resources: Finally could not match the modern weapons materials of war used by the British. The rebels fought with weapons like swords. They were brave and fearless, but lacked coordination and discipline. The British had the excellent system of communication. So troops could be moved quickly and decisions taken fast.

Results of the Revolt: The rise of Nationalism: The greatest consequence of the Revolt was the rise of a felling of nationalism in India. It was turning point in the history of India's freedom struggle. It united the people of all parts of India. While the leaders of the Revolt did not fight for the concept of a single united nation, some like Tantia Tope and the Rani of Jhansi become role models to many people who were inspired by their bravery. Within 90 years of the Revolt, India won independence, not by waging war but through a non- violent mass movement.

The Aftermath of the revolt: In the beginning, the Revolt was a success, but within a short, while the British suppressed it. Great acts of violence and cruelty were committed by both the Indian rebels and the British in the course of the Revolt.

The British had regained control of the country by the end of 1859, but they could not carry on ruling the land with the same policies any more.

Given below are the important changes that were introduced by the British.

1. The British parliament passed a new act in 1858 and transferred the powers of the east India Company to the British crown in order to ensure a more responsible management of Indian affairs. A member of the British cabinet was appointed secretary of state for India and made responsible for all matters related to the governance of India. He was given a council to advise him, called the India council. The governor- general of India was given the title of viceroy, that is, a personal representative of the crown. Through these measures the British government accepted direct responsibility for ruling India.

2. All ruling chiefs of the country were assured that their territory would never be annexed in future. They were allowed to pass on their kingdoms to their heirs. Including adopted sons. However, they were made to acknowledge the British Queen as their sovereign paramount. Thus the Indian rulers were to hold their kingdoms as subordinates of the British crown.

3. It was decided that the proportion of Indian soldiers in the army would be reduced and the number of European soldiers would be increased. It was also decided that instead of recruiting soldiers from Awadh, Bihar, central India and south India, more solders would be recruited from among the Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans.

4. The land and property of Muslims was confiscated on a large scale and they were treated with suspicion and hostility. The British believed that they were responsible for the rebellion in a big way.

5. The British decided to respect the customary religious and social practices of the people in India.

6. Policies were made to protect landlords and seminars and give them security of right over their lands.

7. Thus a new phase of history began after 1857.

