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POPULAR RESISTANCE TO COMPANY RULE

The early years of the English East India company's rule in India witnessed a large number of uprisings and rebellions. As we have learnt, over a period of 100 years, starting from 1750s to 1850s, the English East India company adopted various measures to transform India into a colony. Different policies followed by the British in India during this period were primarily in the interest of the British. A number of land revenue experiments were made which caused hardship to cultivators. Local administration failed to provide relief and natural justice to the rural poor. In this lesson we will learn how the peasantry and tribal people suffered under the colonial administration and why they resorted to revolts. With a brief narrative of important popular uprisings, we will analyze the nature and significance of these uprisings. The Revolt of 1857 has a major significance because, for the first time, it brought together people having different ethnic, religious and class background in a unified movement against the British rule.



OBJECTIVES

After studying the lesson, you will be able to:

- discuss the background to the popular revolts which broke out till 1857;
- explain the nature and significance of these revolts,;
- identify the issues that led to the Revolt of 1857.and
- analyse the importance and significance of the Revolt of 1857.

19.1 CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO POPULAR REVOLT

We have read in earlier lessons that the British rule in India had a number of changes in socio-economic life of the Indian people. The industrial Revolution (we will learn more about it in subsequent Lessons) made it necessary for England to look for raw materials and markets in other countries. This necessity guided the policy of the colonial ruler in India. Indian economy was geared to serve the interests of the British masters. Let us recall some of the important changes in Indian economy during this period.

- A new set of property relations was introduced and land was made saleable commodity.
- Private ownership of land was recognized and a number of intermediaries came into existence in between the owner and cultivator of the land.



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- Commercial crops were encouraged in place of food crops to serve the British capitalists.
- Speculation and investment in land by merchants, bureaucrats and landlords led to the growth of absentee landlordism.
- Growing burden of taxation made the cultivators an easy prey to the revenue collections, merchants and money lenders.
- Transfer of wealth from India to England became a common feature.
- Local industries were suppressed in order to make way for the British manufactured goods.
- Tribals lost their traditional rights in land due to the land revenue policy of the British government.

All these changes dealt a serious blow to the rural society, particularly the cultivators and tribals. For the peasant, the new changes in agrarian economy and social structure meant more intensive and systematic exploitation.

To recall it again, the colonial rulers were concerned only with the collection of revenues in time which were fixed at high rates. Zamindars and others who were engaged in collecting the revenue were least concerned about the paying capacity of the cultivators and forcefully collected the taxes. In meeting the increasing demand of taxes, the peasants were compelled to sell their lands or they were caught in the trap of money lenders. Justice could not be expected from the local administration because it was under the influence of the rich. Thus, under the colonial rule, the nexus of the official, the landlord and the money lender combined together to exploit the peasantry. Bengal famine of 1770, bear testimony to the devastating effect of the British policy over the rural society. Alongwith the colonization of the economy, changes introduced by the British in local administration and society created discontent and resentment among local population. This discontent at various junctures took the form of rebellion.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 19.1

1. How did Indian peasantry met the increasing demand of taxes by Britishers?

2. Under the colonial rule nexus of which agencies was formed to exploit the peasantry?

19.2 MAJOR UPRISINGS

Before analyzing the nature and importance of early resistance to the British authority, it would be better for us to be introduced to some of the rebellions. From 1760s to the Revolt of 1857, there were a large number of rebellions spreading over different parts of India. We will discuss these rebellions in two categories – the peasant uprising and the tribal uprisings.

(i) Peasant Uprisings

Growing burden of taxation, eviction from land and the Bengal famine led to the impoverishment of a large section of the peasantry. Many of these people being



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evicted from lands joined the bands of *Sanyasis* and *Fakirs*. Though they were religious mendicants they used to loot the grain stocks of the rich and the treasuries of the local government. The *Sanyasis* often distributed their wealth among the poor and established their own government. However, they could not sustain their struggle for long in the face of strong repressive measures of the British rulers. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote a novel, *Anand Math* to immortalise the *Sanyasi* Rebellion.

Peasants of Rangpur and Dinajpur, two districts of Bengal, were aggrieved by the tyranny of the revenue contractors. One such revenue contractor, Debi Singh, created a reign of terror by torturing the peasants in order to collect taxes. When the British officials failed to protect the peasant, the peasants took the law in their own hands. They attacked the local *cutchheries* and store houses of the contractors and government officials. The rebels formed their own government and stopped paying revenues to the Company agents. This rebellion was in 1783. The rebels were finally forced to surrender before the Company officials.

In South India, the situation was in no way different. The dispossessed landlords and displaced cultivators raised the banner of revolt. The *poligars* of Tamilnadu, Malabar and coastal Andhra revolted against the colonial rule in the late 18th and the early 19th century. The revolt of the *Mappilas* of Malabar was most significant. The *Mappilas* of Malabar were the descendants of the Arab settlers and converted Hindus. Majority of them were cultivating tenants, landless labourers, petty traders and fishermen. The British conquest of Malabar in the last decade of the 18th century, and the introduction of the British land revenue administration in Malabar enraged the *Mappilas*. Over assessment, illegal taxes, eviction from land and the change in land ownership right caused growing discontentment among them. Thus, they rose in revolt against the British and the landlords. The religious leaders helped in strengthening the solidarity of *Mappilas* and in developing anti-British consciousness. These *Mappilas* were suppressed by the colonial rulers.

In Northern India the *Jats* of Western U.P. and Haryana revolted in 1824. In Western India Maharashtra was a common centre of uprising and Gujarat also witnessed the revolt of the *Kolis*. We can add more to the list of peasant rebellions. But let us look at tribal uprisings.

(ii) Tribal Uprisings

The establishment of colonial rule also affected the tribal people. Living outside the boundary of the mainstream population the tribals lived in their own world being governed by their own traditions and customs. The colonial government extended their authority to the tribal lands and the tribals were subjected to various extortions. The tribals resented the entry of the colonial administration into their land. Take the example of the *Bhils* of *Khandesh* and the *Kols* of *Singhbhum* (Bihar) who enjoyed independent power under their chiefs. But the British occupation of their territories and the entry of merchants, money-lenders and the British administration in these tribal lands curbed the authority of the tribal chiefs. This led the tribal leaders to revolt against the British rule and their target of attack were all the outsiders in the tribal territories. The insurrections were suppressed by the British.

Similarly, the *Santhals* had been living in a large tract of land in the border of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Their livelihood depended upon the flora and fauna of the jungle. With the introduction of the British rule they were used to clear jungle lands and once they started cultivation on these lands, they were forcibly evicted. Thus, penetration



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of landlords, merchants and money-lenders into their lands brought misery and oppression for the simple living Santhals. The oppression forced the Santhals to take up arms, and they found their leaders in two brothers, Sidhu and Kanu. It was believed that Sidhu and Kanu had blessings from the gods to bring an end to their miseries. They decided to get hold of their lands and to set up their own government. The rebellious Santhals were supported by the local poors like the Gowallahas, Telis, Lohars and others. The rebellious Santhals ultimately failed in the face of the ruthless suppression by the British.

19.3 NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EARLY RESISTANCE

The above narrative of the popular revolts makes certain points clear about the nature of these revolts.

- Actions of the rebels prove that they were clear about their interest and about their enemies. Some features of the peasant and tribal protest movements demonstrate a certain level of political and social consciousness among them.
- In many instances local issues might have triggered off the rebellion. But in the course of the development of the movement, its objective was broadened. Immediate context of a movement may be the oppression of local landlords, once the movement started, it ended up as protest against the British Raj.
- Religious belief, Ethnic ties and traditions played a positive role in mobilizing the peasants and strengthening their solidarity. Very often their notions of their own good old past inspired rebels to recover their lost past. Past basically meant to the rebels to get relief from exploitation and oppression.
- Attempt was made by the ruling class to define the rebellions as a problem of law and order and act of crime. This is complete denial of the peasants understanding of their grievances and their right to protest. It is necessary to understand the domain of peasant and tribal action in its own terms.
- However, the rebels did not have a future plan beyond the restoration of the old order. In spite of their limited objective and narrow world view the rebels definitely exposed the unpopular character of the colonial rule.



INTEXT QUESTION 19.2

1. The Santhal Rebellion took place in which region?

2. Which novel immortalize the Sanyasi Rebellion?

19.4 REVOLT OF 1857—CAUSES AND COURSES

In the earlier section, we have studied how in different parts of India at different point of time, popular revolts posed a challenge to the British Raj. In 1857, we see for the first time, peasant discontent along with protest of some other sections of society against the British conquest, brought together various sections of the society in a unified movement. The events of 1857 are regarded by many historians as early manifestation of nationalism.

**Notes****Reasons for the Revolt**

There were specific grievances which actually precipitated the people's discontent against the British Raj and led to the Revolt of 1857. The Revolt broke out on 10th May in Meerut, when Sepoys revolted and started marching towards Delhi to restore the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah II, on the throne. The Revolt started by the Sepoys very soon spread to other sections of the society. Why did this happen? The British government by introducing changes in the land revenue system and in the administrative structure made its rule unacceptable to the majority of the local population. Lord Dalhousie's policy of annexation and the doctrine of lapse, particularly the annexation of Awadh and other parts of north and central India, created widespread discontentment among the local people in this region. Land being the major economic resource the various land revenue settlements like the permanent settlement, Ryotwari settlement, Mahalwari settlement, etc. introduced by the British in India had significant repercussions on land distribution and distribution of power in local society. The new land settlements were basically aimed at increasing the government's revenue earnings and creating a class of local agents who will stand in support of the British Raj. All these had disastrous consequences on the cultivators and growing revenue demands even compelled Taluqdars and other chiefs to sell their land. Money lending and auction of property further added to the hardship of the peasantry. Artisans and handicrafts men were affected by the promotion of British manufactured goods and neglect of indigenous industry.

Besides the economic grievances, at the social level there was a strong reaction in the local society against the British intervention in their age-old customs and traditions. Being guided by the philosophy of racial superiority a section of the British officials was engaged in modernizing and civilizing India. People were apprehensive of the social legislation introduced by the British. Particularly the abolition of Sati and the widow remarriage act had a negative effect on the common people. These changes were viewed as intervention in the local tradition and culture. Added to this was the fear of conversion to Christianity. All these alienated the people from the British Raj.

The sepoys had their own reasons for resentment. The sepoys were unhappy for low pay and racial discrimination in matters of promotion, pension and terms of service. Soldiers who were basically hailing from the peasant families were also unhappy with the new land settlements introduced by the British. It is true that the sepoys were agitated for various reasons but an immediate provocation was their suspicion that they would be forced to renounce their cultural ethos of centuries old society. Just before the Revolt of 1857, there was a rumor of bone dust in the Atta (flour) ration. The cartridges of the Enfield rifles, which had to be bitten off before loading, were reportedly greased with pork and beef fat. This was perceived as an attack on the religious belief of the soldiers-both the Hindus and the Muslims. Sentiment of the sepoys was well reflected in a proclamation issued at Delhi,- 'It is well known that in these days all the English have entertained these evil designs-first, to destroy the religion of the whole Hindustani Army and then to make the people by compulsion Christians. Therefore, we, solely on account of our religion, have combined with the people, and have not spared alive one infidel, and have re-established the Delhi dynasty on these terms.'

Courses of the Revolt

Initial disturbances started in March, 1857 when at Barrackpore, near Calcutta, Mangal Pandey, a sepoy, asked other sepoys to rise against the British military officers and he killed the British Adjutant, Mangal Pandey was later arrested and hanged to death. After that in May, 1857 at Meerut the regiments of Indian sepoys shot down the



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British officers, broke open the prisons, released their comrades and crossed over to Delhi to appeal Bahadur Shah II, the pensioner Mughal emperor, to become their leader. Rumour spread about the fall of the British rule and soon the rebellion spread to other parts of north and central India. In Awadh, the sepoys proclaimed that sepoy Raj had arrived. Dissatisfaction and disillusion against the British Raj brought many local chiefs, peasants, artisans, civil servants, and religious medicants together in this revolt. In Awadh, the revolt spread to Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad, Benaras, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, Gwalior, Jhansi and Bihar. The revolt in these areas had massive response among the civil population. Some important leaders of the rebellion were Rani Laxmi Bai, Tantia Tope, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Nana Saheb, Kunwar Singh of Arrah.



*Fig. 19.1 Bahadur shah (II) Zafar
Last Mughal Emperor freedom fighter*



*Fig. 19.2 Rani of Jhansi
Laxmi Bai freedom fighter*



Fig. 19.3 Tantia Tope



Fig. 19.4 Nana Sahib

**INTEXT QUESTION 19.3**

- 1) What were the grievances of Indian sepoy?

- 2) Name any five important leaders of rebellion of 1857?

19.5 NATURE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE REVOLT**Nature**

Historians are of different opinions regarding the nature of the Revolt of 1857. British historians interpreted the revolt as a mutiny of the sepoys. Ignoring the grievances of the local people and their participation in the movement, the British historians felt that the rebellion was engineered by the sepoys, and some landholders and princes having vested interest. Recent researches on 1857 however argue that self-interested motives did not have much significance before the combined opposition to the unpopular British regime.

Some historians view the Revolt of 1857 as the first war of Indian independence. Those who don't agree with this interpretation argue that the rebel leaders did not make an attempt to establish a new social order. They tried to restore the old Mughal rule by inviting Bahadur Shah II. It is said that "Although Indian initiatives and priorities were so central in the experience of change there was no national revolt in 1857. The discontented were fractured in loyalty and intention, often looking back to a society and a policy which were no longer viable". Thus, it was not revolution but just a restoration.

Recent studies on the Revolt of 1857, however, focus on the popular participation in the revolt. Besides the sepoys and Taluqdars, rural peasantry participated in large numbers in the revolt. In the case of Awadh, it has been shown that taluqdars and peasants jointly launched the attack. Even in many places when taluqdars made peace with the British, peasants continued their movement. The sepoys had linkage with their kinsmen in the villages and the revolt of the sepoys influenced the civilian population to ventilate their grievances against the British rule. Thus the Revolt of 1857 took the character of a popular uprising.

Causes of the Failure of the Revolt

In spite of popular participation in the Revolt of 1857, the rebels were ultimately forced to surrender before the British. Reasons for the failure of the rebels were:

- the rebels had limited supply of arms and ammunitions,
- there was a lack of communication and centralized leadership among the rebels,
- the British had sufficient resources and also better arms and equipments,
- the rebels did not have clear political agenda for future except their distrust on the foreign rule.
- the rebels, in spite of the popular character of the movement had failed to enlist the support of merchants, intelligentsia and many local princes that rather supported the British.

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Significance of the Revolt

The British though managed to suppress the revolt but realized the extent of people’s resentment. The events of 1857 compelled the British to re-examine their policy towards India, after the revolt; therefore, they adopted a strategy to check the future incidents of such a revolt. In order to win back the confidence of local princes, the British made a declaration that they would no longer expand their existing territorial possessions. Special awards were given to the loyal princes. In the recruitment of army, community, caste, tribal and regional loyalties were encouraged in order to check the solidarity among soldiers. the British took recourse to the policy of ‘divide and rule’ by tactfully utilizing caste, religious and regional identities of Indian people. Another important consequence of the Revolt of 1857 was the declaration of Royal Proclamation in 1858. By this proclamation India’s administration was taken over directly by the British Crown abolishing East India Company’s rule.

Finally, though the rebels failed, their heroic struggle against the British Raj left a deep impression in people’s mind. The spirit of Indian nationalism which was at a formative stage in the second half of the 19th century was greatly influenced by this Revolt.



INTEXT QUESTION 19.4

1) When and how was East India company’s rule abolished?

2) Enlist any three major causes of the failure of the Revolt?



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

In this lesson we have learnt that the establishment of the British rule in India resulted in transformation of India into a colony of the British empire. Rural society was greatly affected by this transformation. Being evicted from their lands, peasants became labourers on their own lands. Different form of taxes made their life more miserable. Whereas those who were engaged in small industries had to close their factories as a result of the import of British manufactured goods. All these changes and unresponsive attitude of the British administration compelled the peasantry to vent their grievances through rebellions. Rebellions were not successful before the organized British armed forces. However, these struggles paved the way for future challenge to the British Raj in India. In this regard, the Revolt of 1857 is unique in a sense that cutting across the caste, community and class barriers, Indian people for the first time put up a unified challenge to the British rule. Though the efforts of the rebels failed, the British government was pressurized to change their policy towards India.



TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Explain the nature of the rebellions earlier to the Revolt of 1857.
2. Discuss the causes of the Revolt of 1857.

**Notes**

3. Explain the significance of the Revolt of 1857.

**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****19.1**

- 1) By selling their land –holdings.
- 2) Officials of British Government, land lord and Money lender.

19.2

- 1) Border of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa.
- 2) Anand-math written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

19.3

- 1) Low pay, social discrimination in promotion , pension & terms of service.
- 2) Rani Laxmi Bai, Tantia Tope, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Nana Saheb, Kunwar Singh of Arrah.

19.4

- 1) In 1858 through a declaration of Royal Proclamation by the British crown.
- 2) Refer section 19.5

HINTS TO TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. Refer section 19.2, 19.3
2. Refer section 19.4
3. Refer section 19.5 para 4