



7

POPULAR RESISTANCE TO THE BRITISH RULE

British colonial rule had a tremendous impact on all sections of Indian society. Can you imagine being ruled by some strangers year after year? No, we cannot. Most of us were born after 1947 when India had already become independent. Do you know when the British conquered India and colonised its economy they faced stiff resistance from the people. There were a series of civil rebellions. These rebellions were led by rulers who were deposed by the Britishers, ex-officials of the conquered Indian states, impoverished *zamindars* and poligars. It brought together people having different ethnic, religious and class background against the British rule. In this lesson, we will read about some important popular uprisings, their nature and significance. We will also read about the uprising of 1857 which had a major impact on our National Movement.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- discuss the causes of the popular resistance movements against the colonial rule before 1857;
- explain the nature and significance of the peasant and tribal revolts;
- identify the issues that led to the Revolt of 1857; and
- analyse the importance and significance of the Revolt of 1857.

7.1 THE EARLY POPULAR RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS AGAINST COLONIAL RULE (1750-1857)

Can you think of a reason why these resistance movements are called popular? Was it because of the large number of people who participated in them? Or was it because of the success they met with? After reading this section you will be able to arrive at a conclusion.

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

7.1.1 Causes of Popular Resistance Movements

Why do people resist? They resist when they feel that their rights are being taken away. That means all resistance movements started against some form of exploitation.

British rule whose policies had undermined rights, status and economic position of Indians symbolised this exploitation. The protest and resistance was mainly offered by the displaced ruling classes, peasantry and tribals. For example, when Warren Hastings attacked Banaras and imprisoned King Chet Singh to fulfill his unjustified demand of money and army, the people of Banaras rebelled. In Madras Presidency, Poligars rebelled, when the British tried to snatch away their military and land rights. Interference in religious practices was another cause of these popular rebellions. Often these revolts were anti-Christian. This was due to the socio-religious reforms introduced by the British which were unacceptable to the people.

In some other rebellions, difference between the religion of the ruler and exploited classes became the immediate cause for the rebellion. This happened in Mappila Rebellion of Malabar region. Here the Muslim peasantry fought against the Hindu landlords and moneylenders. In the next section we shall read about the nature of this movement.

7.1.2 Nature of Popular Resistance Movements

Violence and plunder were the two most popular tools used by the rebels to express their resistance against their oppressors. Lower and exploited classes often attacked their exploiters. They were the Britishers or the *zamindars* or the revenue collecting officials, wealthy groups and individuals. Santhal Rebellion saw mass scale violence where account books of moneylenders and government buildings were burnt and their exploiters punished.

In a previous lesson we read about the land policies of the British. The purpose was to extract as much money as possible from the peasants and tribal people. This caused so much unrest among the peasants and the tribals that they started expressing their resentment against the British.

It is important to know that these popular resistance movements aimed at restoration of old structures and relations which had been done away with by the British. Each social group had its own reasons to raise its voice against the colonial powers. For example, displaced *zamindars* and rulers wanted to regain their land and estates. Similarly, the tribal groups rebelled because they did not want the traders and moneylenders to interfere in their lives.

7.2 PEASANT MOVEMENTS AND TRIBAL REVOLTS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

You would be surprised to know that beginning with the Sanyasi Rebellion and Chuar Uprising in Bengal and Bihar in the 1760s, there was hardly a year without an armed

opposition. From 1763 to 1856 there were more than 40 major rebellions apart from hundreds of minor ones. These rebellions were, however, local in character and effects. They were isolated from each other because each rebellion had a different motive. We will now read more about these movements in the next section of this lesson.



Notes



Figure 7.1 Map of India citing various places of Peasant and Tribal Revolts in the 19th century

7.2.1 Peasant Revolt

In an earlier lesson you read about the various land settlements and the adverse effects they had on the Indian peasantry. The Permanent Settlement had made the *zamindar* the owner of the land. But this land could be sold off if he failed to pay the revenue

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

on time. This forced the *zamindars* and the landlords to extract money from the peasants even if their crops failed. These peasants often borrowed money from the moneylenders, who were also called *mahajans*. The impoverished peasants could never pay back this borrowed money. This led to many hardships like extreme poverty and being forced to work as bonded labourers. Hence the lower and exploited classes often attacked their exploiters. Failure to pay by the *zamindars* also meant that the land would be taken away by the British. The British then would auction this land to the highest bidder, who often came from the urban areas. The new *zamindars* from the city had little or no interest in the land. They did not invest money in seeds or fertilizers to improve the fertility of the land but only cared to collect as much revenue as they could. This proved destructive for the peasants who remained backward and stagnant.

To get out of this situation, the peasants now started producing commercial crops like indigo, sugarcane, jute, cotton, opium and so on. This was the beginning of commercialisation of agriculture. The peasants now depended on merchants, traders and middlemen to sell their produce during harvest time. As they shifted to commercial crops, food grain production went down. Less food stocks led to famines. It was therefore not surprising that the hungry peasants revolted. Let us read more about some peasants revolts which took place on account of the British policies:

- (i) **The Faqir and Sanyasi Rebellions (1770–1820s):** The establishment of British control over Bengal after 1757 led to increase in land revenue and the exploitation of the peasants. The Bengal famine of 1770 led peasants whose lands were confiscated, displaced *zamindars*, disbanded soldiers and poor to come together in a rebellion. They were joined by the Sanyasis and Fakirs.

The Faqirs were a group of wandering Muslim religious mendicants in Bengal. Two famous Hindu leaders who supported them were Bhawani Pathak and a woman, Devi Choudhurani. They attacked English factories and seized their goods, cash, arms and ammunition. Maznoom Shah was one of their prominent leaders. They were finally brought under control by the British at the beginning of the 19th century.

The Sanyasi Uprisings took place in Bengal between the periods of 1770-1820s. The Sanyasis rose in rebellion after the great famine of 1770 in Bengal which caused acute chaos and misery. However, the immediate cause of the rebellion was the restrictions imposed by the British upon pilgrims visiting holy places among both Hindus and Muslims.

- (ii) **The Indigo Rebellion (1859-1862):** The British adopted many ways through which they could increase their profits. They also started interfering with the basic means of livelihood of the people. Not only did they introduce new crops, they also brought new techniques of farming. Heavy pressure was put on the *zamindars* and peasants to pay high taxes and grow commercial crops. One such commercial crop was **Indigo**. The cultivation of indigo was determined

by the needs of the English cloth markets. The discontent of the farmers growing indigo was mainly for three reasons:

- They were paid very low prices for growing indigo;
- Indigo was not lucrative as it was planted at the same time as food crops;
- And loss of fertility of the soil because of planting indigo.



Notes



Figure 7.2

As a result, food stocks declined. The peasants suffered at the hands of the traders and the middleman on whom they depended to sell their goods, sometimes at very low prices. They supported the *zamindars* to maintain their dominance and deal with their problems in administering those areas.

The peasants launched a movement for non cultivation of indigo in Bengal. Hindu and Muslim peasants together went on strike and filed cases against the planters. They were supported by the press and the missionaries. The government passed orders in November 1860, notifying that it was illegal to force the *raiya*s to cultivate indigo. This marked the victory for the rebels.

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule



Figure 7.3 Indigo cultivation in Bengal

- (iii) **Farazi Movement (1838-1848):** This was the first ever no-tax campaign against the British Government led by Shariatullah Khan and Dadu Mian. Their band of volunteers fought heroically with the armed group of Indigo planters and *zamindars*. It brought together all the cultivators of Bengal against the tyranny and illegal extractions by the landlords.
- (iv) **Wahabi Movement (1830's-1860's):** The leader of the movement was Syed Ahmed Bareilvi of Rae Bareilly who was greatly influenced by the teachings of Abdul Wahab of Arabia and Shah Waliullah, a Delhi saint. The movement was primarily religious in its origin. It soon assumed the character of a class struggle in some places, especially in Bengal. Irrespective of communal distinctions, peasants united against their landlords.

7.2.2 Significance of Peasant Revolt

The aggressive economic policies of the British shattered the traditional agrarian system of India and worsened the condition of peasants. The peasant revolts taking place in various parts of the country were mainly directed at these policies. Though these revolts were not aimed at uprooting the British rule from India, they created awareness among the Indians. They now felt a need to organise and fight against exploitation and oppression. In short, these rebellions prepared the ground for various other uprisings such as Sikh Wars in Punjab and finally the Revolt of 1857.



ACTIVITY 7.1

Resistance is shown by all of us in our day to day life. How is this resistance different from the resistance movements? What makes some resistance movements popular? Discuss these questions with your friends, peer group or family. Write a note of not more than 50 words on the discussion.

7.2.3 Tribal Revolts

Another group of people who revolted against the British rule were the tribals. The tribal groups were an important and integral part of Indian life. Before their annexation and subsequent incorporation in the British territories, they had their own social and economic systems. These systems were traditional in nature and satisfied the needs of the tribals. Each community was headed by a chief who managed the affairs of the community. They also enjoyed independence regarding the management of their affairs. The land and forests were their main source of livelihood. The forests provided them with basic items which they required for survival. The tribal communities remained isolated from the non-tribals.

The British policies proved harmful to the tribal society. This destroyed their relatively self-sufficient economy and communities. The tribal groups of different regions revolted against the Britishers. Their movements were anti-colonial in nature because they were directed against the colonial administration. The tribals used traditional weapons, mainly bows and arrows and often turned violent. The Britishers dealt severely with them. They were declared criminals and anti-social. Their property was confiscated. They were imprisoned and many of them were hanged. The tribal movement in India remained confined to some regions only. But it did not lag behind other social groups as regards participation in the anti-colonial movements. We shall now read about some major tribal revolts that took place against the British rule:

- (i) **The Santhal Rebellion (1855-57):** The area of concentration of the Santhals was called Daman-i-Koh or Santhal Pargana. It extended from Bhagalpur in Bihar in the north to Orissa in the south stretching from Hazaribagh to the borders of Bengal. The Santhals like other tribes worked hard to maintain their lives in the forests and wild jungles. They cultivated their land and lived a peaceful life which continued till the British officials brought with them traders, moneylenders, *zamindars* and merchants. They were made to buy goods on credit and forced to pay back with a heavy interest during harvest time. As a result, they were sometimes forced to give the *mahajan* not only their crops, but also plough, bullocks and finally the land. Very soon they became bonded labourers and could serve only their creditors. The peaceful tribal communities were now up in arms against the British officials, *zamindars* and money lenders who were exploiting them. Sidhu and Kanu were leading Santhal rebel leaders.



Notes

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

They gave a heroic fight to the British government. Unfortunately, the Santhel Rebellion was crushed in an unequal battle but it became a source of inspiration for future agrarian struggles.



Figure 7.4 *Tirka Manjhi*

- (ii) **Munda Rebellion (1899-1900):** One of the most important and prominent rebellion which took place after 1857 was the Munda Rebellion. The Mundas traditionally enjoyed certain rights as the original clearer of the forest which was not given to the other tribes. But this land system was getting destroyed in the hands of the merchants and moneylenders long before the coming of the British. But when the British actually came into these areas they helped to destroy this system with a rapid pace when they introduced contractors and traders. These contractors needed people to work with them as indentured laborers. This dislocation of the Mundas at the hands of the British and their contractors gave birth to the Munda Rebellion. The most prominent leader of this rebellion was Birsa Munda who was more aware than the others as he had received some education from the Missionaries. He encouraged his tribe people to keep the tradition of worshipping of the sacred groves alive. This move was very important to prevent the Britishers from taking over their wastelands. For this, Birsa Munda fought against the moneylenders/*mahajans* and English officials.

He attacked Police Stations, Churches and missionaries. Unfortunately the rebels were defeated and Munda died in prison soon after in 1900. But his sacrifice did not go in vain. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 provided some land ownership rights to the people and banned bonded labour of the tribal. Birsa Munda became the architect of Munda Rebellion and somebody who is remembered even today.



Notes



Figure 7.5 Birsa Munda



Do you know

Indentured: An indentured laborer was one who had to work for others on a contractual basis for a fixed period of time. The person had to work in a foreign/new place and in return would be given payment for travel, accommodation and food.

- (iii) **Jaintia and Garo Rebellion (1860-1870s):** After the First Anglo-Burmese War, the British planned the construction of a road connecting Brahmaputra Valley (present day Assam) with Sylhet (present day Bangladesh). The Jaintias and the Garos in the North-Eastern part of India (present day Meghalaya) opposed the construction of this road which was of strategic importance to the British for the movement of troops. In 1827, the Jaintias tried to stop work and soon the unrest spread to the neighbouring Garo hills. Alarmed, the British burnt several Jaintias and Garo villages. The hostilities increased with the introduction of House Tax and Income Tax by the British in 1860's. The

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

Jaintias leader U Kiang Nongbah was captured and publicly hanged and the Garo leader Pa Togan Sangma was defeated by the British.



Figure 7.6 U-Kiang Nongbah memorial

- (iv) **The Uprising of the Bhils (1818-1831):** The Bhils were largely concentrated in Khandesh (present day Maharashtra & Gujarat). Khandesh came under British occupation in 1818. The Bhils considered them as outsiders. On the instigation of Trimbakji, rebel minister of Baji Rao II they revolted against the Britishers.
- (v) **The Kol Uprising (1831-1832):** The Kols of Singhbhum in the Chhotanagpur area enjoyed autonomy under their chiefs but the entry of the British threatened their independence. Later the transfer of tribal lands and the coming of moneylenders, merchants and British laws created a lot of tension. This prompted the Kol tribe to organise themselves and rebel. The impact was such that the British had to rush troops from far off places to suppress it.
- (vi) **The Mappila Uprisings (1836-1854):** The Mappilas were the Muslim cultivating tenants, landless labourers and fishermen of Malabar region. The

British occupation of Malabar region and their new land laws along with the atrocities of the landlords (mainly Hindus) led the Mappilas to revolt against them. It took many years for the British to crush the Mappilas.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 7.1



Notes

1. Explain the following terms in one sentence each:
(a) Faqirs (b) Mahajan (c) Mappilas
2. In the space given space list three groups involved in the exploitation of the Indian peasantry.
(a)
(b)
(c)
3. List three causes of popular resistance movements in the given space.
(a)
(b)
(c)

7.3 THE UPRISING OF 1857 – CAUSES, SUPPRESSION AND CONSEQUENCES

The revolt of 1857 started on 10th May when the Company’s Indian soldiers at Meerut rebelled. Called the Sepoy Mutiny by the British, it is now recognised as the First War of Independence against the British rulers. Indian soldiers killed their European officers and marched towards Delhi. They entered the Red Fort and proclaimed the aged and powerless Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, as the Emperor of India. This rebellion was a major anti-colonial movement against the aggressive imperialist policies of the British. In fact, it was an economic, political and social struggle against the British rule. This severe outburst of anger and discontent shook the foundations of colonial rule in large parts of India. We will now study the causes of dissatisfaction among the Indian people which made them rebel against the British rule.

- (a) **Political Causes:** The nature of colonial expansion through annexation became a major source of discontent among the Indian rulers. British wanted to acquire land and collect as much wealth for England as they could. Their policy of annexation called Doctrine of Lapse and Subsidiary Alliance led to a number of independent kingdoms being annexed to the British Empire. These were states that were enjoying British protection but their rulers had died without leaving

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

a natural heir to the throne. As a result their adopted sons could now no longer legally inherit the property or receive the pension which was granted to them by the British. In this way Lord Dalhousie annexed the Maratha States of Satara, Nagpur, Jhansi and several other minor kingdoms. On the death of Baji Rao II, the pension granted to him was abolished and the claim of his adopted son, Nana Saheb, to receive this pension was denied to him. This interference by the East India Company was disliked by many Indian rulers. Before the policy of Doctrine of Lapse, the Indian ruler had a right to adopt an heir to his throne even if he was childless, but now they had to take prior consent from the British.



Figure 7.7 Map of India citing the major cities participating in the Revolt of 1857.

The policy of annexation affected not only the rulers but affected all those who were dependent upon them namely, soldiers, crafts people and even the nobles.

Even the traditional scholarly and priestly classes lost the patronage which they were getting from these rulers. Thousands of *zamindars*, nobles and poligars lost control over their land and its revenues. The annexation of Awadh on grounds of misgovernment was also resented by the Nawab who was loyal to the British. No alternative jobs were provided to the people who lost their jobs when the British took over Awadh. Even the peasants had to pay higher taxes and additional land revenue.

The continuous interference of the British in the basic way of living, traditional beliefs, values and norms was seen by the masses as a threat to their religion. The British administrators gradually became arrogant and gulf between them and the people widened.

- (b) **Economic Causes:** Another important cause of the Revolt was the disruption of the traditional Indian economy and its subordination to the British economy. The British had come to trade with India but soon decided to exploit and impoverish the country. They tried to take away as much wealth and raw material from here as they could. The Britishers kept high posts and salaries for themselves. They used political control to increase their trade as well as export and import of foreign goods. All means were used to drain India of her wealth. Indian economy now suffered under the British policies. Since they worked against the interests of Indian trade and industry, Indian handicrafts completely collapsed. The craftsmen who received royal patronage were impoverished when the states were annexed. They could not compete with the British factory made products where machines were used. It made India into an excellent consumer of British goods and a rich supplier of raw materials for the industries in England. The British sold cheap, machine made clothes in India which destroyed the Indian cottage industry. It also left millions of craftsmen unemployed. The British also sent raw materials to England for the factories there. This left little for the Indian weavers. The Britishers also imposed heavy duties on Indian made goods. Now they could reap huge profits as there was no competition for their goods. Thus, the British drained India of her wealth and her natural resources.

What other measures did the British take to exploit India? To buy raw materials and sell their finished goods they introduced steamships and railways. The railways opened a vast market to the British and facilitated export of Indian raw materials abroad. The railways connected the raw material producing areas with the exporting ports. As a result British goods flooded the Indian market. But do you know that the railways played an important role in the national awakening of the country too? They let people and ideas come closer together, something that the British had never anticipated. In 1853, Dalhousie opened the first telegraphic line from Calcutta to Agra. They also introduced the postal service to India.



Notes

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

Since land was the major source of revenue for them, the British thought of various means to get revenue from land. The colonial policy of intensifying land revenue demand led to a large number of peasants losing their land to revenue farmers, traders and moneylenders. This was done through the Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems. Permanent Settlement of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa did not recognise the hereditary rights of the peasants on land. On the other hand, if they failed to pay 10/11th of the entire produce, their property could be sold off. To prevent this situation the peasants often borrowed money from the moneylenders at a high rate of interest. Sometimes they even sold their property to the moneylenders. Even the officials harassed the peasants who dared not seek justice at the courts for fear of further harassment. The new class of *zamindars* that were created by the British became their political allies. They supported them in times of need and acted as buffers between the British and the people. Some of them even supported the British against the freedom movement. The economic decline of peasantry and artisans was reflected in 12 major and numerous minor famines from 1770 to 1857. All these factors helped to spread an anti-British feeling which ultimately culminated in the revolt of 1857.

- (c) **Social and Religious Causes:** The British were not very sensitive to the feelings of the vast mass of Indian people. Social reforms against sati, female infanticide, widow re-marriage and education of woman, made many people unhappy. With an objective to convert people the Christian missionaries opened schools and college. They also needed a population which was educated and modern enough to buy their goods, but not enough to prove detrimental to British interests. It made the people believe that the Government was in collusion with the missionaries to eradicate their religion and convert them to Christianity. The passing of Act XXI of 1850 enabled converts to Christianity inherit ancestral property. The new law was naturally interpreted as a concession to Christian converts which further created anxiety and fear among the people.

The religious sentiments of the sepoys were hurt in 1806 in the Madras presidency. The Hindus were asked to remove their caste marks from their foreheads and the Muslims were asked to trim their beards. Though the sepoy uprising was put down, it was evident that the British neither understood nor cared for the Indian soldiers. The loyalty of the sepoys was further undermined by certain military reforms which required them to serve overseas. This outraged their religious feelings. They had an aversion to overseas services, as travel across oceans meant loss of caste for them.

- (d) **Discontent in the Army:** The soldiers in the East India Company's army came from peasant families which were deeply affected by the governments' policies. Indian soldiers were not given posts above that of subedars. Some sepoys wanted special *bhatta*/allowance if sent on oversea duty. Sometimes they were paid, but most of the time they were not. They, therefore, started distrusting

their officers. These instances contributed in their own way to the revolt of 1857. The soldiers had other grievances too. They were paid salaries less than their English counterparts. As a result, the morale of the Indian sepoy was very low. On the other hand, when the soldiers refused to cross the 'black water' that is oceans and seas because their religion forbade it, the British were ruthless on them.

- (e) **Immediate Cause:** Strong resentment was rising among the Indians and they were waiting only for an occasion to revolt. The stage was all set. Only a spark was needed to set it on fire. Introduction of greased cartridge in 1856 provided that fire. The government decided to replace the old-fashioned musket, 'Brown Bags' by the 'Enfield rifle'. The loading process of the Enfield rifle involved bringing the cartridge to the mouth and biting off the top. There was a rumour among the Sepoys in January 1857 that the greased cartridge contained the fat of cow and pig. The cow is sacred to the Hindus and the pig is forbidden to the Muslims. The sepoys were now convinced that the introduction of greased cartridges was a deliberate attempt to defile Hindu and Muslim religion and their religious feelings. This sparked off the revolt of sepoys on 29th March 1857.



Notes

7.3.2 Course of the Revolt

A sepoy called Mangal Pandey was the first soldier who openly disobeyed orders. He killed two English officers at Barrackpore near Calcutta on 29 March 1857. He was arrested, tried and executed. The regiments of Barrackpore were disbanded. The news of Mangal Pandey very soon reached other parts of the country and resulted in open revolts.



Figure 7.8 Mangal Pandey

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

Popular Resistance to the British Rule

The most decisive uprising occurred at Meerut where 85 sepoy of the cavalry regiment were sentenced to 2-10 years imprisonment for refusing to use greased cartridges. The very next day, on 10th May 1857, three regiments broke into open mutiny. They killed British officers and broke open the prison to release their comrades. They began to march towards Delhi, where they were joined by the local infantry and the common people. The rebels captured Delhi and killed many British officers. They declared the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah as the emperor of India.

From Delhi the revolt spread to other places. In Kanpur, Nana Sahib was declared the Peshwa. His troops were commanded by Tantya Tope and Azimullah. At Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal was assisted by Maulvi Ahmadullah. In Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai and in Arrah, Kunwar Singh led the revolt. Khan Bahadur Khan was the leader in Bareilly.



Figure 7.9 Begum Nazrat Mahal

The loss of Delhi greatly lowered the prestige of the British. To recover their lost prestige they took help of the loyal forces from Punjab. The siege lasted four months and Delhi was finally recaptured on 10th September 1857. It took another ten months of fighting before the Governor-general, Lord Canning, could proclaim the end of the Mutiny on 8th July 1858.

Stiff resistance had been offered to the British force by the heroic trio of the rebellion – Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, Tantya Tope and Kunwar Singh. Rani Laxmi Bai led the rebel ranks. Mounted on horseback, she boldly faced the British cavalry but when her horse stumbled and fell she was killed. According to the British commander-in-chief, Sir Hugh Rose, she was the best and bravest military leader of the rebels. Kunwar Singh was killed in another battle in Bihar. Tantya Tope was captured while

he was asleep. He was hanged after a trial. This was the end of the heroic trio and the rebellion was finally suppressed by the British.

The old Emperor Bahadur Shah along with his two sons was taken prisoner. After a trial he was deported to Rangoon, where he died in 1862, at the age of 87. His sons were shot dead at Delhi without a trial. We must now look into the causes for the failure of the revolt.

**ACTIVITY 7.2**

Which personality of the revolt of 1857 inspired you the most? Can you identify any two of their qualities that you may also share?

7.3.3 Nature of the Revolt

A big debate surrounds the revolt of 1857. British historians describe the events of 1857 -1858 as a mutiny by the sepoys. It should perhaps be mentioned here that there were many uprisings by the sepoys prior to 1857. One example is the Vellore mutiny of July 1806 where Indian sepoys had revolted against the East India Company's garrison. Nevertheless, 'order' was restored very soon and this revolt did not go beyond the confines of the cantonment.

But if you look closely into the facts of 1857 you will see the difference. The revolt was started by the sepoys but was joined in large numbers by the civilian population. The participation of peasants and artisans made the revolt a widespread and popular event. In some areas, the common people revolted even before the sepoys. All this shows that it was clearly a popular revolt. It was characterised by Hindu-Muslim unity. Unity between different regions also existed. Rebels in one part of the country helped people fighting in other areas. The revolt should be seen as the first nationalist struggle in India for independence from foreign rule.

You will realise that the Revolt of 1857 was not one movement but many. It was not a class revolt either. The peasantry did not rebel against the landlords. They only directed attacks against money-lending grain dealers or the representatives of the British Indian government. But their policies strongly influenced the way a particular region as a whole was going to react. The Revolt in Awadh as well as in other regions, was popular, in that it pertained to people as a whole and was carried out by them. Talukdars and peasants in Awadh fought together against a common foe. But there is no doubt that the revolt of 1857 was the first time that soldiers of the Indian army recruited from different communities, Hindus and Muslims, landlords and peasants, had come together in their opposition to the British. It also provided the necessary foundation for the later successful anti-colonial struggles against the British.

**Notes**

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes

7.4 FAILURE OF THE REVOLT

Although the revolt was a big event in the history of India, it had very little chance of success against an organised and powerful enemy. It was suppressed within a year of its outbreak. Various causes led to the failure of the Revolt of 1857. There was no unity of purpose among the rebels. The sepoys of Bengal wanted to revive the ancient glories of the Mughals while Nana Saheb and Tantya Tope tried to re-establish the Maratha power. Rani Lakshmi Bai fought to regain Jhansi, which she had lost as a result of British policy of Doctrine of lapse. Secondly, this rising was not widespread it remained confined to North and Central India. Even in the north, Kashmir, Punjab, Sind and Rajputana kept away from the rebels. The British managed to get the loyalty of the Madras and Bombay regiments and the Sikh states. Afghans and Gurkhas also supported the British. Many Indian rulers refused to help the rebels. Some were openly hostile to them and helped the British in suppressing the revolt. The middle and upper classes and the modern educated Indians also did not support the revolt. Thirdly the leadership of the movement was weak. Indian leaders lacked organisation and planning. The rebel leaders were no match to the British soldiers. Most of its leaders thought only of their own interest. They were motivated by narrow personal gains. They fought to liberate only their own territories. No national leader emerged to coordinate the movement and give it purpose and direction. Lakshmi Bai, Tantya Tope and Nana Saheb were courageous but were not good military generals. With the escape of Nana Sahib and the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar came the end of Peshwaship and the Mughal rule.

The rebels were short of weapons and finances. Whatever few weapons existed were old and outdated. They were no match to the sophisticated and modern weapons of the British. The rebels were also poorly organised. The uprisings in different parts of the country were uncoordinated. Often the sepoys behaved in an uncontrolled manner. On the other hand the telegraphic system and postal communication helped the British to speed up their operation. The English mastery of the sea enabled them to get timely help from England and crush the revolt ruthlessly.

7.5 SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT OF THE REVOLT

The Revolt of 1857 was the first sign that the Indians wanted to end British rule and were ready to stand united for this cause. Even though they failed to achieve their objective they succeeded in sowing the seeds of nationalism among the Indians. Indian people became more aware of the heroes, who sacrificed themselves in the Revolt. However, it was the beginning of distrust between Hindus and Muslims which the British later exploited to continue their rule in India.

7.6 THE LEGACY OF THE REVOLT

The Revolt of 1857 is unique in a sense that cut across 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 pressurised to change their policy towards India. In August 1858, by the Act for the Better Government of India, both the Board of Control and the Board of Directors were abolished. And the office of the Secretary of State for India was created with an Indian Council of 15 members to assist the Viceroy of India, designation earlier known as Governor General in India. In August 1858 the British crown assumed control of India from the East India Company and in 1877 Queen Victoria was crowned empress of India. This brought to an end the rule of East India Company. In the proclamation of 1st November 1858 the Queen announced a continuation of the Company's policies. India became a colony of the British Empire. The Indian rulers were assured of their rights to succession after adoption. The crown promised to honor all the treaties and the agreements made by the company with the rulers of Indian State.

By now the British had become distrustful of the Hindu Muslim unity. They decided to follow the policy of divide and rule the country. They kept a tight control over key positions both in the civil and military administration. To give expression to this pledge the Indian Civil Service Act of 1861 was passed, which provided for an annual competitive examination to be held in London for recruitment to the coveted Civil Service.

The revolt played a pivotal role in Anglo- Indian history. The British became cautious and defensive about their empire, while many Indians remained bitter and would never trust their rulers again. It was not until the emergence of Indian National Congress in 1885 and Mahatma Gandhi that Indians re-gathered their momentum for home rule. One group which kept away from trouble and opposition to the British was the English-educated Indians. This group owed its rise to the conditions of the new rule. Some of its members were descendants of the new Bengali *zamindars*, a class created by the Permanent Settlement in Bengal. It is curious to note that some members of this elite group would turn against the British some thirty or forty years after the 1857 Revolt.

The Army had been mainly responsible for the crisis of 1857. Hence, radical changes were introduced in the army. The strength of European troops in India was increased and the number of Indian troops reduced from the pre- 1857 figure. All Indian artillery units with the exception of a few mountain batteries were disbanded, even the artillery was kept with the British soldiers. On the other hand, there were attempts to play native against natives on the basis of caste, religion and region. All the big posts in the army and the artillery departments were reserved for the Europeans. There was mutual distrust and fear between Indians and the British.

It was increasingly realised that one basic cause for the Revolt of 1857 was the lack of contact between the ruler and the ruled. Thus, a humble beginning towards the development of representative institutions in India was made by the Indian Councils Act of 1861. The emotional after effects of the Revolt were perhaps the most unfortunate. Racial bitterness was perhaps the worst legacy of the struggle.

**Notes**

MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes



INTEXT QUESTIONS 7.2

1. List two grievances of the Indian sepoy against the colonial rulers.
2. Name any three important leaders of the Revolt of 1857.
3. When and how was the East India Company's rule abolished?
4. Enlist any three major causes of the failure of the Revolt of 1857.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Oppression and exploitation of the people were the main reasons for the rebellion and resistance to British rule in India.
- Being evicted from their lands, peasants and tribals became labourers on their own lands. Different form of taxes made their life miserable.
- Those who were engaged in small cottage 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.
- Unfortunately these rebellions were not successful before the organised British armed forces but they paved the way for future challenge to the British Raj in India.
- The Revolt of 1857 was a big challenge to British authority. It was led by the sepoys and supported by the common people.
- Economic, political, social, religious and military causes were responsible for the Revolt of 1857. The greased cartridges incident was the immediate cause of the revolt.
- A large part of India was affected by the revolt. The main centres of the revolt were Meerut, Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, Bareilly and Arrah. Some important leaders of the revolt were Bakht Khan, Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope, Azimullah, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Maulvi Ahmadullah, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Khan Bahadur Khan and Kunwar Singh.
- The revolt failed to end British rule in India. The major reasons for its failure were – its localised and unorganised nature, weak leadership and lack of weapons and finances.



TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. Explain two common features of the Peasant and Tribal Revolts.
2. How did the political and socio-religious factors led to the Revolt of 1857?
3. Explain the significance of the Revolt of 1857.
4. Make a table listing main leaders of the Revolt of 1857 and the reasons for their joining it.
5. Do you think the Revolt of 1857 made any impact on the British and their rule in India? Analyse the situation and give your inference.
6. History tells us that people normally protest when their means of livelihood are threatened. Do you think this holds true even today? Identify one incident that has happened recently published from the newspaper or magazines and make a report of about 50 words.
7. (a) On the given outline map of India locate the region of the following rebellions:
 - (i) Faqir and Sanyasis Rebellion (ii) Santhal Rebellion
 - (iii) Munda Rebellion (iv) Jaintia and Garo Rebellion
- (b) Give one cause for each of the rebellion.



Notes



MODULE - 1

India and the World
through Ages



Notes



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

7.1

- Faqirs were a group of wandering Muslim religious mendicants.
 - Mahajan was the term used for moneylenders.
 - Mappilas were the Muslim cultivating tenants, landless laborers and fishermen of Malabar region.
- The three groups of exploiters were:
 - Officials of British Government
 - Landlord
 - Money lender
- The four causes of popular resistance movements were:
 - Exploitation by the British
 - High revenue rates on the peasants
 - Compulsory growing of commercial/cash crops
 - Interference in the religious practices of the people by the British.

7.2

- Low pay and no *bhatta*, that is, no extra payment for their duty overseas,
 - Social discrimination in promotion, pension & in terms of service,
 - Use of greased cartridge rumored to contain the fat of cow and pig which hurt their religious sentiments.
- Rani Laxmi Bai, Tantia Tope, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Nana Saheb, Kunwar Singh of Arrah.
- The East India Company's rule was abolished in 1858 through a declaration of the Queen's Proclamation by the British Parliament.
- The three major causes of the failure of the Revolt of 1857 were:
 - The revolt was a big event in the history of India. It had very little chance of success against an organised and powerful enemy.
 - It remained confined to north and central India.
 - There was no unity of purpose among the rebels
 - The leadership of the movement was weak.
 - The rebels were short of weapons and finances.