



# Lecture-19



## **The Revolt of 1857**

### **Nature of the revolt of 1857**

#### **Sepoy mutiny**

Most of the British historians describe the events of 1857 -1858, as a mutiny by the sepoys. Incidentally, history of the Uprising of 1857 is largely understood through the writings of British. Greater parts of the records out of which history takes shape, come from British sources; and the large material of Indian side suffered destruction during the uprising, 1857 1858.

Colonial historiography of the Great War of 1857 was governed by the agenda of minimising the challenge that it constituted to the omnipotent British power. As it had shaken its foundations, the British began camouflaging the formidable war of 1857 by propagating it as a mutiny.

#### **Popular revolt**

By looking closely, we can see that to term the revolt of 1857 as a sepoy mutiny was rather a British propaganda. It is true that 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.

#### **War of independence**

A national war of independence necessarily implies or presupposes a definite plan and organisation. Further such an organisation implies a pre-concerted conspiracy or plot to drive out the British. However, there is no evidence for the existence of any such conspiracy. The upsurge of the people was limited to a comparatively narrow region of India comprising at best the great part of UP and a narrow zone to its east, west and south.

The civil population that revolted thought more of plunder and other means of attaining wealth and/or power than anything else, at least there is no evidence to show that with the probable exception of a very few individuals the people were inspired by the idea of regaining freedom of India. In fact, a large section of Indians were friendly to the British and even sided with them in the revolt. So it will be an exaggeration to call the revolt of 1857 as national war of independence.

#### **Nationalist element**

The British termed the 1857 revolt as the unpatriotic and selfish sepoy mutiny. Dr. R C Majumdar also did not find any nationalist element in the rebellion. He was also against calling it as the war of independence. However, there are many others who do not concur with these views.

Jawahar Lal Nehru in his *Discovery of India*, terms the revolt of 1857 as essentially a feudal uprising, though there were some nationalistic elements in it. So it was not only a sepoy Mutiny. V. D. Savarkar believed it to be the first war of Indian independence.

According to Stanley Wolpert, it was far more than a mutiny, yet much less than a war of independence.

#### **Unity across region and religion**

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.

However, the rebel forces were unable to inspire a sense of unity among Indian population during the revolt which is reflected in the fact that a large number of people sided with the British in the war or did not participate in the war at all. Also different section of society had

different motives for participating in the uprising. A common agenda among them could not be evolved.

**Different grievances, Common foe**

The Revolt of 1857 was not one movement but many. The majority of the rebels consisted of the sepoys who were discontented with the discrimination they faced in the service in the British army. The civilian population who joined the sepoys turning the revolt into an uprising against the British consisted of different class viz. peasants, Zamindars, artisans, traders, local rulers etc. This civilian population consisting of different classes also had different grievances. For example, while the peasants were angered by exploitative land levies and losing their lands under permanent settlement system, Zamindars resented the British for taking away their titles and lands on their own whims. Similarly artisans and traders suffered under British regime due to exploitative economic and mercantilist policies. The local rulers were looking for personal gains and resented the British for annexing their states.

**MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:**

**1. Which among the following was not an economic cause of the revolt of 1857?**

- A) Heavy taxation
- B) But down on major patronage for artisans and handicrafts
- C) increasing availability of market for Indian cotton.
- D) increased pressure on agricultural land

**2. Which external events influenced the revolt of 1857?**

- A) First Afghan war
- B) Punjab wars
- C) Crimean wars
- D) Santhal rebellion

i) A only

ii) A and B

iii) A, B and C

iv) All of the above

**3. What were the socio- religious causes during this period that caused unrest among people?**

A) Activities of Christian missionaries

B) Attempts to bring social reforms

C) Taxation of mosques and temple lands

D) Racial superiority complex of Britishers

i) A, B and C

ii) All of the above

iii) Only C

iv) C and D

**4. Why were the sepoys discontent?**

A) They had to cross seas to serve

B) Lesser emoluments compared to the British counterpart

C) Racial discrimination

D) They were allowed to wear sectarian marks, and hence religions were supported in the army

i) All of the above

ii) A, B and C

iii) Only D

iv) C and D

**5. Find the incorrect match for the Centre of the revolt and leaders associated**

A) Delhi ----- General Bakht Khan

C) Kanpur ----- Nana Saheb

c) Lucknow ----- Begut Hazarat Mahal

D) Bareilly ----- Kunwar Singh