

REVOLT OF 1857: FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE PEOPLE

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Abstract:

The condition of India in 1857 affords the best opportunity for popular outbreaks, varying in nature according to the circumstances and temperament of the different types of people, such outbreaks may also be caused by the natural desire of the people to assume a posture of strength against their oppressive rulers and the spontaneous character of the popular participation in the sepoy movement of 1857 certainly tends to confirm the view.

KEYWORDS:

opportunity , political purposes , social , British paramountcy .

INTRODUCTION:

But the disprove this contentions and to reinforce the theory that the movement of 1857 was not imbued with any social and political purposes, the British paramountcy asserts that had not the mutiny extinguished local authority the civil population would not have dared to rebel.(1)

BRITISH RULE & DEEP ANTAGONISM:

The attitudes ignores the tension prevailing at that time and involves the acceptance of an untenable position that the British rule in India had not awakened any such deep antagonism that the people would not rise up even under gravest provocation at proper time. The civil disturbances of the earlier period demonstrated that the people had actually revolted even without the help of the sepoys.(2)

EARLY CAUSE OF 1857 REVOLT:

Early in January 1857, a Brahman Sepoy, belonging to one of the British regiments, stationed at Dumdum, about 5 miles to the north of Calcutta, was walking leisurely to his chowka, to prepare his food, with his lota full of water in his hand. He was met on the way by a low cast Khalasi attached to the magazine at Dumdum, who asked him to let him drink from his lota. The sepoy the high caste Brahmin refused saying "I have secured my lota; you will defile it by your touch." With above factor greased cartridges were supplied to the soldiers using the new enfield rifles. These cartridges had to be bitten before being inserted to the rifle. The grease was aid to contain the fat of cows which the Hindus regarded as sacred and also of pigs which were repulsive to Muslims. The supply of such greased cartridges hurt the sentiments of both the Hindu and the Muslim Soldiers and it worked as a "A spark for the accumulated heap of powder magazine of dissatisfaction and resentment.(3)

1857 UPRISING:

The uprising against the British rule began on 29th March, 1857 when a Brahmin sepoy, Mangal Pandey of the Army at Barackpore openly mutinied. On the 11th May 1857, the troops at Meerut rebelled, shot their officers. They marched to Delhi and there they proclaimed the Moghul emperor Bahadur Shah as the emperor of India and persuaded him to assume the leadership. This was followed by mutiny of Sepoy in U.P.; Bengal, Bihar, Central India, Rajasthan, Deccan and the Punjab. Those Princes, Nawab's and chieftains who were nursing grievance against the British assumed leadership of these sepoys who had so spontaneously rebelled.(4)

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THE SPREAD OF MUTINY:

British rule in India had not awakened any such deep antagonism that the people would not rise up even under gravest provocation at proper time. The civil disturbances of the earlier period demonstrated that the people had actually revolted even without the help of the sepoys. The same thing happened during the anti-British struggle of 1857 as the history of the civil rebellion in the India mutinies would tend to show. On 14th May, the people plundered the tehsils bungalows, destroyed the Jail and banyas and Mahajans were despoiled. As in Muzaffarnagar, so also in Saharanpur Civil rebellion preceded the mutiny. In Lucknow the long smouldering discontent of the people burst in to a flame several days before the 71st Infantry regiment broke out on 30 May. In Banda, the mutiny of troops was preceded by a vast upsurge of the people.(5)

The chief among these were Bahadur Shah, Rahi of Jhansi, Tantia Tope, Nanasahib, Khan Bahadur Khan, Azimulla Kunwar Singh. All these first group of India's freedom fighters fought the British in accordance with their abilities and the success of the mutineers at various places, and the massacre or flight of the local British officials, in particular their abandonment of the city of Delhi in to the hands of the mutineers led the people all over Rohilakhand and Awadh to believe that the British Raj had ceased to exist. No visible symbol was left of its authority in many localities, and there was almost a complete political vacuum and lack of any kind of authority(6).

REVOLT OF THE PEOPLE:-

All classes of people in India were thoroughly discontented and disaffected against the British. It is therefore quite natural and no extra ordinary phenomenon, that there should be a general rising of the people against the hated feringhness wherever the success of the mutiny had destroyed their power and authority. Another class which was powerfully influenced by motives of self interest and contributed largely to the origin and prolongation of the popular revolt, was the one connected with the land.(7)

It is possible that less selfish motives were also at work. The general discontent and disaffection against the British made some persons anxious to put an end to their rule and they seized the god-sent opportunity to drive away the hated feringhees, now that they had lost the only prop of their rule in India namely, the allegiance of the sepoy's.

Some Muslim leaders and Maulavis were fired by the ambition of restoring Muslim rule in India. A few leaders both Hindu and Muslim might have been urged by the noble instinct of achieving Freedom from foreign yoke.(8)

Maulavi Ahamadulla of Fyzabad, originally a native of Arcot in Madras. Early in January 1857 an incendiary Address written in Hindustani was placarded at Madras calling upon all true believers to rise against the english infidels, and drive them from India. (9)

It declared that the English "had now abandoned all principles of Justice and were sent on appropriating the possessions of the Mahomedans and that there was but one way of resisting their encroachments – a holy war."(10)

There can be no reasonable doubt, therefore that the various factors mentioned above were mainly responsible for the general 'upsurge of the people' and it was thus that without any preconserved plan and organization. The mutiny merged itself in to a general rising of the civil population of all types and classes. The civil population was undoubtedly spurred on to revolt because of the grave discontent and resentment which different class of people nursed in their heart for different reasons, but if the mutiny had not extinguished the local authority. The civil population would not have dared to revolt. The peoples revolt was the effect, and not the, cause of the mutiny. It is sufficient to remark that here, as in other parts of the country the 'Banyas' and Mahajans were in the majority of cases the victims and "fearfully have many of them been made to suffer for their previous rapacity and avarice."(11)

When, the fall of Delhi ceased to be looked upon as imminent, the agricultural communities began to turn their eyes of towards the local treasuries and did not scruple to oppose themselves to Govt. officers and troops. But the character of the rising continued to be the same after the Sepoy's had mutinied, killed their officers and released the prisoners in jail. The rising became widespread, particularly in Awadh and Rohilakhand and secondly Local leaders big or small, established their own raj was believed to have come to an end.(12)

EMPEROR OF HINDUSTHAN:

The first news of the mutiny of the sepoy's at Mirat was conveyed to Bahadur Shah by the mutineers themselves. On reaching Delhi on the morning of May, 11 they went straight to the Red Fort and called upon his majesty for help declaring that they had killed the English at Mirat and had come to fight for the faith. Bahadur Shah was extremely unwilling to have anything to do with this motley crowd that continued pouring in to the Red fort and took position in the courtyard of Diwan-i-khas. On the morning of

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May 12, the whole body of sepoy officers presented 'Nazar' to Bahadur shah and described themselves as his faithful soldiers. Bahadur Shah placed himself at the head of the sepoys and assumed the title of the Emperor of Hindusthan. (13) But were finally defeated by the British. Without going in to details of the various battles we shall just state how these leaders succumbed to the British. Bahadurshah Jafar was not in a position to give active and forceful leadership. He surrendered himself to British on 21st Sept. 1857 and was tried for treason and then sent as an exile of Rangoon. Nanasahib, the son of the powerful Mahratta Peshwa Bajirao, took an important role in the fight but was defeated by the British at Kanpur. Tantia Tope proved to be an efficient military leaders. He assumed command of the Gwalior Rebels; and fought the British forces valiantly at a few places, (14)

RANI OF JHANSI :-

when the sepoy regiment stationed at Jhansi revolted, the Rani organized a memorial defense against the British offensive. This was the fiercest battle in the whole war of independence. Though she fought with great courage, finally she succumbed in the battle field even the British admired her valour and capacity. Sir Hugh Rose who had fought against her has said, "Although a lady she was the bravest and the best military leader of the Rebels" with the defeat of Rani of Jhansi, the strength of the revolt against the British had been practically crushed. The British were happy indeed but Indians were dejected at the failure of their first attempt to free themselves.(15)

IMPACT OF THE UPRISING ON INDIAN PEOPLE:

The failure to liberate India from the political bondage of the British drove home certain important lessons to Indian leaders. Then fully realized that without a co-herant plan under a single supreme national leader efficient and well organized army with adequate weapons.

The other and more important impact of the uprising was on the psychology of the people. This was due to the brutalities committed by the British in suppressing the rebellion. (16)

Stories built around the British atrocities as above reached the people throughout India. The heroism of leaders like Rani of Jhanshi and Tantia Tope also evinced admiration of the common people, but their sad fate helped to shape public opinion. The education Indians saw the need for developing a sense of National Solidarity and a sweeping change in the minds of the people, if the Britisher's were to be driven out. This involved education and several measures of social reforms.(17)

CONSEQUENCES OF THE UPRISING:

The 1857 war of liberation from the British had for reaching consequences in many ways, change in political organization; change in British policy towards India. It was also realized that to some extent the rebellion was due to the British reformist zeal affecting Hindu social and religious life. After the revolt the British became very reluctant to interfere with religion and caste matters in India. The British section of the Indian army which was relatively small till then came to be strengthened. The more effective weapons of warfare were not given to the Indian Soldiers. As a result of these measures the British were able to built an Indian army which remained loyal to it and it also became the backbone of the British Empire.(18)

CONCLUSION:

The hopes of personal gain were the sole motives of many and indeed of all classes of people 'notably the goonda elements' such as the gujar's, ranghars, Jats etc.

The most glaring fact to be noted in this connection is that though the revolt was most widely spread in Awadh there was not a single leader who exercised any control over the vast but scattered rebel forces, or had any voice in shaping the general course of the great movement.

To the lack of leadership must be attributed the serious, almost incredible errors committed by the sepoys which in many cates saved the British from great disasters.

The failure of the outbreak may also be attributed to the fact that neither the leaders, nor the sepoys and the masses were inspired by any high ideal.

The spirit of defending religion, which kindled the soon receded in to the background, and through it, formed the slogan or way-cry for a long time, a truly religious inspiration was never conspicuous as a guiding force of the movement. On the other hand, the British were inspired by the patriotic zeal for retaining their empire and profoundly moved by the spirit of revenge against the Indians who had murdered their women and children.

But even though, for reasons aforesaid, the great outbreak of 1857 ended in failure, it would be mistake to minimize its importance or under rate, the gravity of its danger to the British. In spite of all their defects and drawbacks, the sepoy's and Indian rebels.

In particular the back of interest shown by the intellectuals in the movement was a serious

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drawback. The full extent of which will perhaps never be known History of modern times, shows that all great political movement have an intellectual background and draw their nourishment largely from that source. The outbreak of 1857 not only lacked any such intellectual background but ran counter to the views of the intellectual classes who never looked upon it with sympathy.

The outbreak of 1857 would go down in history as the first great and direct threat to the British rule in India on an extensive scale. It must be admitted by all unprejudiced critics that the British Govt. and people bravely faced the situation and proved equal to the occasion. The resource fullness, organization and state manship of the Govt. backed by devotion to duty courage and a spirit of fellow-feeling and sacrifice which never yielded to privations and suffering, however great, enabled the British to survive the fiery ordeal. Tribute also must be paid to British Diplomacy which could gather round their banner a proud nation of heroes who believed in their heart of hearts that the British had defrauded them of their dominions and independence by most ignoble means.

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