***1857-8 – The Rebellion***

The first expression of organized resistance to British control of India was the Revolt of 1857. It began as a revolt of the sepoys of the Company’s army but eventually secured the participation of the masses. Its causes lay deeply embedded

in the grievances that all sections of Indian society nurtured against the British rule. Taxes were high throughout the region, and there were few opportunities for the enterprising to make a profit. Western influences were limited in the towns, but the first Christian missions had appeared there, and new colleges had opened, which seemed to be an unwelcome intrusion to many devout Hindus and Muslims. They also fed fears of a Christian offensive and of forced conversions. In the countryside the vital issues were the control of the land, the amount of tax the peasant farmers had to pay, and the opportunities they had to find outlets for their surplus crops. Early British occupation was disruptive: aristocracies lost power and influence to the new rulers, the conditions under which land was held could be changed, and taxation was more rigorously enforced. It took time for winners to emerge in this situation, people who had been able to extract gains from the new order, and who would compensate for those who had lost out.

Many Indians were unhappy with the Company. It took over previously independent kingdoms within India. Its economic policies made most people poor. Its British- run police and law courts were inadequate or corrupt. Within their army, the British officers had little respect for their Indian soldiers or *sepoys*, and in some cases promoted their conversion to Christianity.

***Causes of the Revolt:***

***Political Causes:***

The political causes of the revolt may be traced to the British policy of expansion through the **Doctrine of Lapse** and direct annexation. A large number of Indian rulers and chiefs were dislodged, thus arousing fear in the minds of other ruling families who apprehended a similar fate.

Example 1: Rani Lakshmi Bai’s adopted son was not permitted to sit on the throne of Jhansi. Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi were annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse. Jaitpur, Sambalpur and Udaipur were also annexed. Other rulers feared that the annexation of their states was only a matter of time.

Example 2: The sentiments of the people were hurt when it was declared that the descendants of the titular Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, would not be allowed to live in the Red Fort.

Example 3: The annexation of Awadh by Lord Dalhousie on the pretext of maladministration left thousands of nobles, officials, retainers and soldiers jobless. This measure converted Awadh, a loyal state, into a hotbed of discontent and intrigue.

**Social and Religious Causes:**

A large section of the population was alarmed by the rapid spread of Western civilization in India. An Act in 1850 changed the Hindu law of inheritance enabling a Hindu who had converted into Christianity to inherit his ancestral properties. Besides, the missionaries were allowed to make conversions to Christianity all over India. The people were convinced that the Government was planning to convert Indians to Christianity.

The abolition of practices like sati (widow suicide) and female infanticide, and the legislation legalizing widow remarriage, were threats to the established social structure. Even the introduction of the railways and telegraph was viewed with suspicion.

***Economic Causes:***

In rural areas, peasants and zamindars (landowners) resented the heavy taxes on land and the stringent methods of revenue collection followed by the Company. Many among these groups were unable to meet the heavy revenue demands and repay their loans to money lenders, eventually losing the lands that they had held for generations. Large numbers of sepoys were drawn from the peasantry and had family ties in villages, so the grievances of the peasants also affected them.

The economic exploitation by the British and the complete destruction of the traditional economic structure caused widespread resentment among all sections of the people. After the Industrial Revolution in England, there was an influx of British manufactured goods into India which ruined industries, particularly the textile industry, of India. Indian handicraft industries had to compete with cheap machine- made goods from Britain. India was transformed into a supplier of raw materials and a consumer of goods manufactured in Britain. All those people who previously depended on royal patronage for their livelihoods were rendered unemployed. So they bore a deep- seated grievance against the British.

***Military Causes:***

The Revolt of 1857 started as a sepoy mutiny. It was only later on that other elements of society joined the revolt. Indian sepoys formed more than 87% of British troops in India. They were considered inferior to British soldiers. An Indian sepoy was paid less than a European sepoy of the same rank. Besides, an Indian sepoy could not rise to a rank higher than that of a Subedar

The extension of the British Empire in India had adversely affected the service conditions of Indian sepoys. They were required to serve in areas far away from their homes. In 1856 Lord Canning issued the General Services Enlistment Act which required that the sepoys must be ready to serve even in British land across the sea.

The ‘Bengal Army’ was recruited from high caste communities in Awadh. They were not prepared to cross the ocean (Kalapani) which was forbidden as per Hindu religious beliefs. They developed the suspicion that the Government was trying to convert Indians to Christianity. After the annexation of Awadh the Nawab’s army was disbanded. These soldiers lost their means of livelihood. They became bitter enemies of the British.

**Immediate Cause:**

The Revolt of 1857 eventually broke out over the incident of greased cartridges. A rumour spread that the cartridges of the new Enfield rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs. Before loading these rifles the sepoys had to bite off the paper on the cartridges. Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys refused to use them. Canning tried to make amends for the error and the offending cartridges were withdrawn, but by then the damage had been done. There was unrest in several places.

In March 1857, Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in Barrackpore, had refused to use the cartridge and attacked his senior officers. He was hanged to death on 8th April. On 9th May, 85 soldiers in Meerut refused to use the new rifle and were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment.

***Main events of the revolt:***

Soon there was a rebellion in the Meerut Cantonment. The Meerut Mutiny (May 9, 1857) marked the beginning of the Revolt of 1857. The Indian sepoys in Meerut murdered their British officers and broke open the jail. On May 10, they marched to Delhi.

**Capture of Delhi:**

In Delhi the mutineers were joined by the Delhi sepoys and the city came under their control. Next day, on 11th May, the sepoys proclaimed the ageing Bahadur Shah Zafar the Emperor of Hindustan. But Bahadur Shah was old and he could not give able leadership to the sepoys. The occupation of Delhi was short-lived.

**Fall of Delhi:**

The British finally attacked Delhi in September. For six days there was desperate fighting. But by September 1857, the British reoccupied Delhi. Thousands of innocent people were massacred and hundreds were hanged. The old king was captured and later deported to Rangoon where he died in 1862. His sons were shot dead. Thus ended the imperial dynasty of the Mughals.

**Centres of the revolt:**

The revolt spread over the entire area from the neighbourhood of Patna to the borders of Rajasthan. There were six main centres of revolt in these regions namely Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi, Gwalior and Arrah in Bihar.

**Lucknow:**

Lucknow was the capital of Awadh. There the mutinous sepoys were joined by the disbanded soldiers from the old Awadh army. Begum Hazrat Mahal, one of the begums of the ex-king of Awadh, took up the leadership of the revolt. Finally the British forces captured Lucknow. The queen escaped to Nepal.

***Kanpur:***

In Kanpur the revolt was led by Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. He joined the revolt primarily because he was deprived of his pension by the British. He captured Kanpur and proclaimed himself the Peshwa. The victory was short- lived.

Kanpur was recaptured by the British after fresh reinforcements arrived. The revolt was suppressed with terrible vengeance. The rebels were either hanged or blown to pieces by canons. Nana Saheb escaped. But his brilliant commander Tantia Tope continued the struggle. Tantia Tope was finally defeated, arrested and hanged.

***Jhansi:***

In Jhansi, the twenty-two-year-old Rani Lakshmi Bai led the rebels when the British refused to accept the claim of her adopted son to the throne of Jhansi. She fought gallantly against the British forces. But she was ultimately defeated by the English.

Rani Lakshmi Bai escaped. Later on, the Rani was joined by Tantia Tope and together they marched to Gwalior and captured it. Sindhia, a loyal ally of the British, was driven out. Fierce fighting followed. The Rani of Jhansi fought like a tigress. She died, fighting to the very end. Gwalior was recaptured by the British.

***Suppression of the Revolt:***

The Revolt of 1857 lasted for more than a year. It was suppressed by the middle of 1858. On July 8, 1858, fourteen months after the outbreak at Meerut, peace was finally proclaimed by Canning. The revolt spread across North India, as Hindus and Muslims, elites and commoners, joined forces against the British. Many landlords, left impoverished, joined the rebellion. Within a year, the British ruthlessly crushed the revolt, killing hundreds of thousands (some say millions) of soldiers and civilians.

Stories (some true, some false) of British women and children being killed by the rebels **inflamed** public opinion in England. Charles Dickens, author of *A Christmas Carol* and other famous stories, wrote that if he were commander-in-chief in India he would “strike that Oriental Race . . . proceeding, with merciful swiftness of execution, to blot it out of mankind and **raze** it off the face of the Earth.” Although Dickens championed the poor in England and opposed slavery in America, he held a **rabidly** racist view of Indians.

1. The British were shocked by the uprising, which recalled the American Revolution. To protect their power, investment and income, they tightened their grip on the subcontinent by transferring rule from the East India Company to the British government.

***Causes of the failure of the revolt:***

***Limited Uprising:***

Although the revolt was fairly widespread, a large part of the country remained unaffected by it. The revolt was mainly confined to the Doab region. Sind, Rajputana, Kashmir, most parts of Punjab. The southern provinces did not take part in it. It failed to have the character of an all-India struggle. Important rulers like Sindhia, Holkar, Rana of Jodhpur and others did not support the rebels.

**No Effective Leaders:**

The rebels lacked an effective leader. Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope and Rani Lakshmi Bai were brave leaders, no doubt, but they could not offer effective leadership to the movement as a whole.

**Limited Resources:**

The rebels lacked resources in terms of men and money. The English, on the other hand, received a steady supply of men, money and arms in India.

**No Participation of the Middle Class:**

The English educated middle class, the rich merchants, traders and zamindars of Bengal helped the British to suppress the revolt.

**Results of the revolt:**

The great uprising of 1857 was an important landmark in the history of modern India.

1. The revolt marked the end of the East India Company’s rule in India. India now came under the direct rule of the British Crown. This was announced by Lord Canning at a Durbar in Allahabad in a proclamation issued on 1 November 1858 in the name of the Queen. Thus, Indian administration was taken over by Queen Victoria, which, in effect, meant the British Parliament. The Governor General’s office was replaced by that of the Viceroy.
2. The Doctrine of Lapse was abolished. The right to adopt sons as legal heirs was accepted. The Revolt of 1857 paved the way for the future struggle for freedom in India.
3. After the rebellion had been put down, the new royal government of India that replaced that of the East India Company promised that it had no intention of imposing 'our convictions on any of our subjects'. It distanced itself further from the Christian missionaries. A stop was put to the deposing of princes, and greater care was shown to the rights of landlords.
4. The major part of the army was in future to be drawn from so-called 'martial races'. The huge parades, or durbars, at which the new empress of India received the allegiance of the hierarchies of traditional India through her viceroy, seemed to symbolise the new conservatism of the regime.
5. Yet beneath the trappings of conservatism, Indian society changed much more rapidly in the second half of the 19th century than it had done in the first. The British had much more to offer Indians. Imports of Western technology had been limited before the 1850s. Thereafter a great railway system was constructed - 28,000 miles of track being laid by 1904 - and major canal schemes were instituted that more than doubled the area under irrigation in the last 20 years of the century. The railways, the vastly increased capacity of steamships, and the opening of the Suez Canal linked Indian farmers with world markets to a much greater degree. A small, but significant, minority of them could profit from such opportunities to sell surplus crops and acquire additional land. Some industries developed, notably Indian-owned textile manufacturing in western India. The horrific scale of the famines of the 1880s and 1890s showed how limited any economic growth had been, but the stagnation of the early 19th century had been broken.
6. Universities, colleges and schools proliferated in the towns and cities, most of them opened by Indian initiative. They did not produce replica English men and women, as Macaulay had hoped, but Indians who were able to use English in addition to their own languages, to master imported technologies and methods of organisation and who were willing to adopt what they found attractive in British culture. The dominant intellectual movements cannot be called Westernisation. They were revival or reform movements in Hinduism and Islam, and were the development of cultures that found expression in Indian languages.
7. Within the constraints of a colonial order, a modern India was emerging by the end of the 19th century. British rule of course had an important role in this process, but the country that was emerging fulfilled the aspirations of Indians, rather than colonial designs of what a modern India ought to be.