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India's First War of Independence 1857

Many historians called this First War of Independence as a 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857. For them it was just a bunch of Indian sepoys (soldiers) who had mutinied. They largely failed to recognize the involvement of a vast section of Indian society that took part in this struggle. Peasants and nobles all were involved. Lack of planning and co-ordination amongst people who took part in this struggle resulted in defeat of Indians. Many innocent people were killed on both sides. **Karl Marx** wrote about the attitude of British media in 1857 - 'And then it should not be forgotten that while the cruelties of the English are related as acts of martial vigor, told simply, rapidly, without dwelling on



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*disgusting details, the outrages of the natives, shocking as they are, are still deliberately exaggerated.'*

### **Period just before the beginning of India's First War of Independence**

British had little respite from fighting against Indians as they tried to strengthen their grip on India. Sometimes by design, sometimes almost by accident the area controlled by the British increased, until by 1857 everything from the borders of Afghanistan in the west to the jungles of Burma in the east, from the Himalayas in north, to the beaches of Sri Lanka in south were under British East India companies control. In 1857 the total number of soldiers in India was 260,000 amongst them there were just around fourteen percent (34,000) European soldiers.

Less than ten years after the last Anglo-Sikh war there was great unrest in India, specially the northern part. Somewhere along the way the British seemed to lose touch with their Indian subject. By 1857 there was a big gulf between Indians and British.

### **Factors responsible for unrest amongst Indian masses**

- The arrival of missionaries had also caused great unease among the Indians. Evangelical Christians had little understanding of, or respect for, India's ancient faiths. The attitude of scrupulous non-interference in religious affairs that had characterized British rule in the 18th century was forgotten. Native populace started to believe that the British wished to convert them. The passing of Act XXI of 1850, which enabled converts to inherit ancestral property, confirmed this belief; the new law was naturally interpreted as a concession to Christian converts. Hindus and Muslims were forced into Christianity. The British were rude and arrogant towards the Indians who they described as barbarians without any culture. The European judges hardly ever convicted British for their crimes.
- Thousands of soldiers and nobles got unemployed when Lord Dalhousie annexed Avadh. Under his '**Doctrine of Lapse**' the princes were denied the long-cherished right of adoption; in this way Dalhousie annexed the Maratha States of Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi and several minor principalities. On the death of the ex-Peshwa, Baji Rao II, the pension granted to him was abolished and the claims of his adopted son, Nana Sahib, were disregarded.
- British administrative laws ruined both the peasants and landlords. Indian handicrafts completely collapsed and the craftsmen were impoverished. India became a market place for finished goods from England. Poverty increased and the discontent among the masses motivated the Indians to join the revolt in large numbers. Thus, the British drained India of her wealth and all her natural resources.

### **Beginning of First War of Independence (1857)**

People whispered of the old prophecy, which stated that 100 years after the battle of Plassey, the rule of 'John Company' would end. Plassey had been in 1757 and in the hundredth year after the battle it seemed everyone was awaiting a spark. The cartridge of Enfield rifle used by British-Indian Army was heavily greased with animal fat. Indian soldiers heard and quickly passed on the news that the grease was a mixture of cow (sacred to Hindus) and pig (abhorrent to Muslims) fat.

It began at **Barrackpore** on **29th March 1857**. **Mangel Pande**, a young soldier of the 34th Native Infantry, shot at his sergeant major on the parade ground. When the British adjutant rode over, Pande shot the horse and severely wounded the officer with a sword. He was later arrested and hanged. As a collective punishment the 34th Native Infantry was disbanded. Mangal Pande became a martyr and an icon representing the beginning of Indian War of Independence.

A few weeks later on 24th of April 1857, eighty-five soldiers of the 3rd Light Cavalry in **Meerut** refused orders to handle the new cartridges. They were arrested, court-martialled and sentenced to ten years hard labor each. On **9th May 1857**, at an appalling ceremony in the parade ground of Meerut, they were publicly humiliated: stripped of their uniform, shackled and sent to prison. The following day (**10th May 1857**) was a Sunday and as Britons prepared for church, Meerut exploded. Enraged soldiers broke open the town jail and released their comrades. A mob from the bazaar and Indian soldiers poured into the cantonment where the Britishers lived and killed many of them. Then these soldiers marched towards Delhi. There were three regiments of native infantry in Delhi.

On the morning of **11th May** the soldiers from Meerut reached Delhi. Gathering below the walls of the Red Fort, the mutineers called for last Mughal King **Bahadur Shah**. A British officer, Captain Douglas, commanded Bahadur Shah's personal guard. From the walls high above Captain Douglas ordered them to disperse. Soldiers accompanied by a mob burst into the palace, killed Douglas and asked Bahadur Shah to reclaim his throne. The 38th, 54th, and 74th regiments of infantry and native artillery under **Bahkt Khan** (1797- 1859) joined the rebel army at Delhi in May. The loss of Delhi was a crushing blow to British prestige and the symbolic associations of the capital of the Moghuls becoming the center of the mutiny was something the British could not ignore. It took British nearly two months to regroup and then they set out to reclaim Delhi. From Meerut and Simla two British columns set out for the capital. Hampered by lack of transport, it was weeks before they joined forces at Ambala. Punishing disloyal villages as they advanced, one could have charted their course by the scores of corpses they left hanging from trees as the British army moved towards Delhi. At Badli-ke-Serai, five miles from Delhi, they met the main army of the Indian soldiers. British won there but most of the Indian soldiers fled back to the protection of the walls of Delhi. The British established themselves on Delhi ridge, a thin spur of high ground to the north of the city. In **September 1857**, under the command of **Major Nicholson** and with support of Sikh and Gurkha army were able to reclaim Delhi, breaching the walls with heavy guns and after a bitter street-to-street fight. In the attack on the Kashmiri

gate Nicholson had been hit by a bullet and died soon after. One last atrocity was yet to happen. British officer Hodson arrested the old King Bahadur Shah and killed his three sons in cold blood. Bahadur Shah was tried for complicity to murder and other offences, found guilty and sent into exile in Rangoon. The last of the Moghuls, Bahadur Shah died there in 1862. Hodson was never punished for his summary executions of the princes. He died in the retaking of Lucknow in 1858.

### **Battle of Kanpur**

Kanpur was an important junction where the Grand Trunk Road and the road from Jhansi to Lucknow crossed. One of the leaders of the First War of Independence, **Nana Saheb of Bithur** was born in 1824. **Nana Saheb** was well educated. He studied Sanskrit and was known for his deep religious nature. On the death of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao-II, in 1851 the Company's Government stopped the annual pension and the title. Nana Saheb's appeal to the Court of Directors was not accepted. This made him hostile towards the British rulers. In 1857 Kanpur was garrisoned by four regiments of native infantry and a European battery of artillery and was commanded by General Sir Hugh Wheeler. After a fierce battle at Kanpur, General Sir Hugh Wheeler surrendered on June 27, 1857.

The English men, women and children who fell into the hands of Nana Sahib were assured of safe conduct to Allahabad. However the inhuman treatment meted out to the Indians by General James O'Neil at Allahabad and Banaras made the crowd angry who retaliated by murdering British men, women and children. Many innocent lives were lost at '**Massacre Ghat**' and '**Bibi ka Ghar**' in Kanpur.

After seizing Kanpur, Nana Saheb proclaimed himself the Peshwa. **Tantia Tope, Jwala Prasad and Azimullah Khan** were the loyal followers of Nana Sahib, and are remembered for their valiant fight against the British. In June 1857 the British defeated Nana Sahib. Though Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope recaptured Kanpur in November 1857, they could not hold it for long as General Campbell reoccupied it on 6th December 1857. Nana Sahib escaped to Nepal and his whereabouts afterwards were unknown. **Tantia Tope** escaped and joined the Rani of Jhansi.

### **Jhansi and Gwalior**

**Rani Laxmibai** was born in 1830 at Banaras in a wealthy family and was named Manukarnika at birth. She got married to King Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi. Gangadhar Rao did not have any children and he adopted one of his relatives Damodar Rao as his heir. After Gangadhar Rao's death in 1853 the British refused to accept Damodar Rao as the legal heir of Jhansi and wanted to annex the kingdom into their rule. In 1857 at Jhansi, the army rebelled and killed the British Army officers. **Rani Laxmibai**, the widow of the late Raja Gangadhar Rao, was proclaimed the ruler of the state. In 1858 the British army once again marched towards Jhansi. Not willing to let the British takeover her kingdom the Rani built an army of 14,000 volunteers to fight the British. The soldiers of Jhansi fought very bravely for 2 weeks and the Rani led the forces in this battle. Sir Hugh Rose recaptured Jhansi on 3rd

April 1858. The English could not capture Rani of Jhansi as she escaped to Kalpi (near Gwalior) where Tantia Tope joined her. Both marched to Gwalior. Sir Hugh Rose also advanced towards Gwalior and captured it in June 1858. **Rani Laxmi Bai** died fighting bravely. **Rani Laxmibai (Rani Jhansi)** became immortal in Indian history for her bravery and struggle against British rule. **Tantia Tope** escaped southward, but was betrayed by one of his friends Man Singh and was finally hanged in 1859.

### Arrah Bihar

**Kunwar Singh**, zamindar of Jagdishpur near Arrah in the state of Bihar, was the chief organizer of the fight against British. He assumed command of the soldiers who had revolted at Danapur on 5th July. Two days later he occupied Arrah, the district headquarter. Major Vincent Eyre relieved the town on 3rd August, defeated Kunwar Singh's force and destroyed Jagdishpur. Kunwar Singh left his ancestral village and reached Lucknow in December 1857. In March 1858 he occupied Azamgarh. However, he had to leave the place soon. Pursued by Brigadier Douglas, he retreated towards his home in Bihar. On 23 April, Kunwar Singh had a victory near Jagdishpur over the force led by Captain Le Grand, but the following day he died in his village. The mantle of the old chief now fell on his brother Amar Singh who, despite heavy odds, continued the struggle and for a considerable time ran a parallel government in the district of Shahabad. In October 1859 Amar Singh joined the rebel leaders in the Nepal Terai.

### Lucknow

At **Lucknow** War against British was led by the **Begum of Awadh Hazrat Mehal** who proclaimed her young son Nawab. Hazrat Begum felicitated her troops in person in Alambagh and when Dilkusha was taken and the soldiers of freedom fought with desperate courage for the defense of Lucknow. Musabagh, which was defended, by a valiant band of revolutionaries under the leadership of the heroic Begum herself till March 1858, when she left Lucknow for the north with her troops followed by Ahmad Shah. Both of them fell upon Shahjehanpur and tried to drive out the British from Rohilkhand. She failed to capture Rohilkhand and she marched on along with other revolutionary leaders towards Nepal where she found asylum till her death.

**India's First War of Independence carried on as late as 1859** in some instances before it was finally over. A number of heroes and heroines of the India's First war of Independence have been immortalized for their fight in against British rule.

### Aftermath of First war of Independence

In the early months of the British recovery, few Indian soldiers were left alive after their positions were overrun. The British soldiers seemed to have made a collective decision not to take prisoners and most actions ended with a frenzied use of the bayonet. Whole villages were sometimes hanged for some real or imagined sympathy for the mutineers. Looting was endemic and neither the sanctity of holy places nor the rank of Indian aristocrats

could prevent the wholesale theft of their possessions. Many a British family saw its fortune made during the pacification of northern India. Later, when prisoners started to be taken and trials held, those convicted of mutiny were lashed to the muzzles of cannon and fired through their body. For more than a year the people of northern India trembled with fear as the British sated their thirst for revenge. The Indians called it 'the Devil's Wind'.

A hundred years after battle of Plassey the rule of the East India Company finally did come to an end. In 1858, British parliament passed a law through which the power for governance of India was transferred from the East India Company to the British crown. In 1858, the Queen issued a proclamation saying that all were her subjects and that there would be no discrimination, appointments would be made on the basis of merit, and that there would be no interference in religious matters. It became evident in the succeeding years that the British government did not honor the Queen's promises. After 1857, the nationalist movement started to expand in the hearts of more and more Indians.

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