



# The Revolt of 1857: Causes, Course, and Consequences

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## Abstract

The Revolt of 1857, also known as the First War of Indian Independence, was a watershed event in Indian history. It represented the first large-scale and organized uprising against British colonial rule, combining political, economic, social, and religious discontent. Sparked by immediate military grievances but rooted in deeper structural causes, the revolt spread across northern and central India, challenging the authority of the East India Company. This paper analyzes the multifaceted causes, the course of the rebellion, its leadership, and its eventual suppression. Drawing upon the works of historians such as R. C. Majumdar, S. N. Sen, and V. D. Savarkar, it also explores the consequences of the uprising — politically, socially, and administratively — and its lasting impact on the Indian freedom movement.

**Index Terms:** Revolt of 1857, Sepoy Mutiny, First War of Independence, British Colonialism, Nationalism, East India Company.

## Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 stands as one of the most significant turning points in the history of colonial India. Beginning as a sepoy mutiny at Meerut on May 10, 1857, it rapidly spread to Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, and several other regions. While the British termed it a "Mutiny," Indian nationalists later regarded it as the first organized expression of national resistance against foreign domination.

The uprising was not a spontaneous act of military defiance alone; rather, it was the culmination of decades of economic exploitation, administrative injustices, and cultural repression. The revolt represented a moment when diverse sections of Indian society — soldiers, peasants, princes, and common people — united under a common desire to overthrow British rule.

## Literature Review

Historians have interpreted the Revolt of 1857 in various ways, reflecting the complexity of the event.

- **R. C. Majumdar** (1957) characterized it as a localized military rebellion rather than a national movement, arguing that it lacked unity and a coherent ideology.
- **V. D. Savarkar**, in his book *The Indian War of Independence (1909)*, portrayed the uprising as the first organized struggle for freedom, emphasizing its nationalist dimension.
- **S. N. Sen** (1958) viewed it as a combination of military mutiny and popular uprising, born of political discontent and economic hardship.
- **Karl Marx**, writing in the *New York Tribune* (1858), described it as a national revolt against British exploitation.
- **Modern historians** like Eric Stokes and Rudrangshu Mukherjee stress the regional diversity of the revolt and the interplay between local grievances and broader anti-colonial sentiment.

These varied interpretations reveal that the Revolt of 1857 was both a military insurrection and a social-political protest, with profound implications for the future of Indian nationalism.

## Causes of the Revolt

The Revolt of 1857 was the outcome of a convergence of **political, economic, social, military, and religious factors**.

### 1. Political Causes

The aggressive policy of annexation pursued by Lord Dalhousie, known as the **Doctrine of Lapse**, created widespread resentment among Indian princes. States like Satara, Jhansi, and Nagpur were annexed on the pretext that they lacked male heirs. The dethronement of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II and the annexation of Awadh in 1856 deeply hurt the sentiments of both the aristocracy and the general populace.

### 2. Economic Causes

British economic policies ruined India's traditional economy. The destruction of indigenous industries, imposition of heavy land revenue under the *Permanent Settlement* and *Ryotwari* systems, and the influx of British goods impoverished artisans and peasants. The dislocation of the agrarian structure created widespread rural distress and resentment.

### 3. Social and Religious Causes

The introduction of Western education, Christian missionary activities, and social reforms such as the abolition of *Sati* and the legalization of widow remarriage were perceived by many Indians as an attempt to undermine traditional religious beliefs. The policy of racial discrimination and the arrogant behavior of British officials further alienated Indians from the colonial government.

### 4. Military Causes

Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the British army faced discrimination in pay, promotions, and treatment. The immediate cause of the rebellion was the **introduction of the Enfield rifle**, whose cartridges were rumored to be greased with cow and pig fat—offensive to both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. Their refusal to use the cartridges led to punishments, igniting open rebellion.

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### 5. Immediate Cause

On **May 10, 1857**, sepoy at Meerut revolted, killed their officers, and marched to Delhi, where they declared the aged **Bahadur Shah II** as Emperor of Hindustan. This act symbolized the restoration of Indian sovereignty and turned the mutiny into a national revolt.

### The Course of the Revolt

The revolt spread rapidly across northern and central India, with major centers of rebellion including **Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, Bareilly, and Gwalior**.

- **Delhi:** The sepoy proclaimed Bahadur Shah II as emperor. The city became the symbolic center of the uprising. However, after a fierce siege, Delhi fell to the British in September 1857, and Bahadur Shah was captured and later exiled to Rangoon.
- **Kanpur:** Led by **Nana Saheb**, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II, the rebels captured the city. After a prolonged battle, British forces recaptured it, leading to severe reprisals.
- **Lucknow:** The rebellion was led by **Begum Hazrat Mahal**, who proclaimed her son Birjis Qadr as ruler. Despite strong resistance, the British ultimately regained control.
- **Jhansi:** **Rani Lakshmibai** of Jhansi emerged as one of the most valiant leaders, defending her kingdom with unmatched courage. She was killed in battle in 1858, becoming a symbol of resistance.
- **Bihar:** The revolt in Bihar was led by **Kunwar Singh**, a 70-year-old zamindar who displayed extraordinary bravery until his death.
- **Gwalior:** The last major battle was fought here, where rebel forces led by Tantia Tope were defeated in June 1858.

By mid-1858, the British had regained control, and the revolt was officially declared suppressed. However, sporadic resistance continued in some regions for several months.

## Reasons for the Failure of the Revolt

Despite its intensity and heroism, the revolt failed due to several key factors:

1. **Lack of unity and coordination:** There was no central leadership or unified command. Different regions acted independently with little coordination.
2. **Limited geographical spread:** The revolt was largely confined to northern and central India; the south and Punjab remained loyal to the British.
3. **Superior British resources:** The British possessed better weapons, disciplined troops, and strong naval power.
4. **Lack of modern communication:** The rebels lacked organized communication networks and supply lines.
5. **Support of Indian princes to the British:** Many Indian rulers, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Sikh chiefs, remained loyal to the British, ensuring their victory.

## Consequences of the Revolt

The aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 was profound and far-reaching, marking a turning point in India's colonial history.

### 1. End of Company Rule

In 1858, the **Government of India Act** was passed, transferring power from the East India Company to the **British Crown**. Queen Victoria issued the **Proclamation of 1858**, assuring Indians of equality before law and non-interference in religious matters.

### 2. Reorganization of the Army

The British restructured the Indian army to prevent future rebellions. The ratio of European to Indian soldiers was increased, and artillery was kept exclusively under British control. Recruitment was concentrated in the so-called "loyal" regions like Punjab and Gurkha areas.

### 3. Administrative Reforms

A new post of **Secretary of State for India** was created in London to oversee Indian affairs, assisted by a council. The Governor-General became the **Viceroy**, representing the British Crown. This marked the beginning of direct imperial control.

### 4. Changes in Policy Toward the Princes

The British abandoned the Doctrine of Lapse and adopted a policy of maintaining princely states as allies, ensuring their loyalty through treaties and privileges.

### 5. Economic and Social Impact

Although the British promised non-interference in religion and customs, economic exploitation continued. Heavy taxation and industrial policies further deepened poverty in rural areas. The revolt, however, created a sense of shared suffering that nurtured future nationalism.

### 6. Emergence of National Consciousness

While the revolt failed militarily, it sowed the seeds of Indian nationalism. The heroism of figures like Rani Lakshmibai, Tantia Tope, and Nana Saheb became symbols of resistance, inspiring later generations in the struggle for independence.

## Discussion

The Revolt of 1857 was not a sudden or isolated event; it was the culmination of years of oppression and discontent. It represented the first united attempt of Indians to overthrow foreign rule, combining traditional loyalties with emerging nationalist sentiments. Though regional in scope and limited in coordination, the revolt demonstrated that the British were not invincible. It exposed the weaknesses of colonial rule and forced the British to rethink their policies.

The revolt's legacy lived on through the rise of the **Indian National Congress (1885)** and the subsequent freedom movement. Its memory became a symbol of unity and sacrifice in India's long struggle for independence.

## Conclusion

The Revolt of 1857 marked the dawn of a new era in Indian history. Though suppressed, it shattered the myth of British invincibility and awakened a spirit of resistance that endured for generations. It transformed the political landscape of India, leading to direct Crown rule and the restructuring of the colonial administration.

More importantly, it gave birth to a shared national consciousness that transcended regional and religious boundaries. The courage of the rebels — from Bahadur Shah II to Rani Lakshmibai — remains etched in India's collective memory as a testament to the indomitable will of a people yearning for freedom.

The Revolt of 1857 was not merely a military uprising; it was the **first great assertion of India's right to self-determination** — a precursor to the long and ultimately successful struggle for independence in the twentieth century.

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