

The Revolt of 1857 – Whether It Is A Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Independence

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Abstract: The revolt of 1857, always gives birth to two pertinent questions - whether it is a nationalist war or a mutiny of sepoys. The latter's participation in the revolt is due to the discontent regarding the introduction of Enfield Rifle and some social and economic reforms introduced by the British Government. The Common people also showed their remarkable involvement into the revolt because of which it gradually turned in to nationalist movement.

Keyword: Revolt, Sepoy Mutiny, The First War of Independence, British Government, Class, Colonialist.

Introduction: A revolt broke out in Meerut against the East India Company, the British felt the danger and took necessary steps to curb it. The army was reorganized, the financial system was changed and finally

the British Crown was called up to exercise direct control over the Indians. The revolt had a premature death- its leaders were blamed to have poor planning strategy, lack of military leadership and weak organisational base. But the revolt became popular and what contribute to its popularity is nothing but the debate that basically lies regarding its nature-when scholars like Veer Savarkar in his book, "The Indian War of Independence-1857", made an attempt to look at the incidents of 1857 from nationalist point of view, some other historians believe that the revolt was a lawless effort of some sepoys. Dr. Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar thus in his book, Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857 writes that this was nothing but a revolt of the sepoys. On the whole, the discussion ran into two directions. While one group termed it Great Revolt, another group prefer to call it Sepoy Mutiny. To them, it was a mutiny of some

aggrieved sepoys of which some dissatisfied feudal chiefs, native rulers and displaced landlords

in the hope of gaining their lost power, took part while the others, selfish to the core and fearful of the British might, refused to join in.

Considering the debate, it is a great pleasure on my part to throw light on the discussion once again. The sepoys who fought in the battlefield no doubt had their own grievances against the British Government but they consciously or unconsciously created an atmosphere where all the Indians came under one umbrella. The Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764) already annoyed the Indians.

When the mutiny of sepoys started, the latter took active participation in it. The British Government now showed its interest in the political affairs of the country. Lord Dalhousie introduced the Doctrine of Lapse by which the adopted children of princes were denied the right to be legal heirs. This policy specially affected the Rani of Jhansi as she did not have child of her own. She

now was ready to hold arms against the British. The British Government also suspended pension of Nana Saheb, the adopted son of last Peshwa Baji Rao II and abolished titles of many native rulers. Overall, the members of Royal families were hurt and were looking for opportunities to teach a lesson to the British. There are however, different arguments found in the involvement of the royal members into the revolt. Tapati Roy in her book, Rani of the Raj told that Rani of Jhansi participated in the revolt to protect her kingdom and her role cannot be equated with any nationalistic fervour. Several other historians also held the personal factors as responsible in the struggle against the British.

At the outset of the revolt, it is said that the introduction of Enfield Rifle with greased cartridge has created discontent among the Indian soldiers who initially showed their loyalty to the Company Rule. A rumour was spread that the cartridges were made of pig fat and cow fat which hurt the religious sentiments of both Muslims and Hindus respectively. An in depth study however reveals that the greased cartridge was only

a lame excuse, the withdrawal of bhatta was no less an important cause. Benjamin Disraeli, the conservative leader, in July 1857 said: "The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges. Such results are occasioned by adequate causes and by the accumulation of adequate causes."¹ Moreover, the Indian soldiers were given a derogatory status in the cantonment and were paid low salary as compared to the European soldiers.

So far as the participation of different classes in the Revolt is concerned, it is assumed that the revolt could not embrace the entire classes though remained widely popular among them. The upper classes sometimes were forced and sometimes to benefit themselves participated in the revolt. This can be well understood by a statement of Rani of Jhansi where she confessed that she was threatened by the sepoys to help them with money ,guns and elephants. Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope also maintained their cordial relation with the British even after creating an impression that they were fighting a patriotic or national war against the hated English. A group of Zaminders were largely influenced

by the motives of self-interest and their support in the revolt was nothing but to regain their lost position.

Large participation of the agrarian classes was mainly due to increasing burden of taxes and tolls. Thus, the main target in the revolt was not the Colonialists rather the Baniyas and the Mahajans who demanding a high rate of interest , threatened to ruin them. It is in this context that the spirit of Indian Nationalism has often been identified as agrarian in nature. Some Muslim leaders in the hope of restoring Muslim rule in India , resisted the British regime and their vision did not extend to the whole of India. Thus, the different social categories took part in the revolt in different forms. The anti-British sentiments in India, as mentioned earlier, were not grown only during the Revolt of 1857. Infact, the common people from the very beginning did not accept the alien rule which was solely responsible for the destruction of Indian villages and tribal life.

As told before, satisfaction of personal gain provoked various classes to rebel against the British and it is also this reason which

infact impelled a group of people within the same class to take the side of the British. Thus, the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkhar of Indore, the Nizana of Hyderabad, the Raja of Jodhpur and other Rajput rulers, the Nawab of Bengal, the rulers of Patiala and many other ruling chiefs and a section of Zaminders of Deccan gave active help to the British on suppressing the revolt. The educated class of Bengal, Punjab and Madras sharply opposed the revolt as they could not make any economic benefit out of the revolt .the lower classes were also not united which could be easily felt by anticipating some of their participation in the revolt and others' hesitation to involve into the struggle. Even the message of the revolt did not spread entirely throughout the country. Thus, when the revolt broke out in Meerut cantonment, the North-Western part remained unaffected. Lack of popular support, proper aims and ideals, modern arms and its limit in certain areas, the revolt failed to unite all the classes and unable to take all-India feature. It is here that the national character of the revolt has been questioned because a revolt in order to be national, needs to be organised in

modernist terms, must be supported by all classes and should provide an alternative programme of action to overthrow the regime against which it is driven. The revolt of 1857 lacks all these characters and thus had an early death. To reject this view, it can be said that the revolt, although not adequate enough to put an end to the British rule , can be described as national as it was for the first time that the soldiers of Indian army recruited from different communities, Hindus and Muslims, landlords and peasants with whatever might be their interests, came together in their opposition to the British.”

According to Bipan Chandra, “The civil rebellion had a broad social base, embracing all sections of society-the territorial magnates, peasants, artisans, religious mendicants and priests, civil servants, shopkeepers and boatmen. The Revolt of the Sepoys, thus resulted in a popular uprising”. Marx, writing from London on 31 July, also suggested that there was more to the disturbances than a mutiny; highlighting their national character, he wrote: “the Sikhs, like the Mohammedans, were making common

cause with the Brahmins, giving rise to a general union against the British rule". From 1920s, efforts were made to analyse the revolt from a Marxist position by pioneers like M.N. Roy and others.

The first major work on the Revolt was published in 1957 on the occasion of 100th anniversary of the event by the renowned historian R. C. Mazumdar. He in his volume, "Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857" clearly states that the revolt was neither a sepoy mutiny nor a mass struggle. P. C. Joshi wrote the editorial column (1857: A symposium, 1957) and it focussed on both the diversities and the specificities of the 1857 revolt. This included assessing 1857 against the colonial backdrop, examining aspects of participation and focussing in a major way on the internal contradictions. S.B. Chaudhuri, Civil Revolt in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-59, 1957 and Theories of the Indian Mutiny, 1965; S.N. Sen, Eighteen Fifty-Seven, 1957; and, K.K. Datta, Reflections on the Mutiny, 1967) were also not uniformly comfortable with the view that the 1857 Revolt was the 'First War of Indian Independence'.

In 2007, a group of retired British soldiers and civilians, some of them descendants of British soldiers who died in the conflict, attempted to visit the site of the Siege of Lucknow. However, fears of violence by Indian demonstrators, supported by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, prevented the British visitors from visiting the site. Despite the protests, Sir Mark Havelock was able to make his way past police in order to visit the grave of his ancestor, General Henry Havelock. This shows that the events of the revolt still sparks not only the minds of the Indians but also the British mind and they are also enthusiastic and curious about the revolt.

The leaders of the revolt are still respected and paid homage for their great sacrifice. Recently, on July 21st 2011, Rani Laxmibai was declared to be one of the "top 10 Bad-Ass wives" in the world by Time Magazine, who supported their husbands.¹¹ This recognition basically reflects that "Indian leaders had developed a broad international outlook. They established the principle that Indians should hate British imperialism but not British people. Consequently, they were supported by a

large number of Englishmen, women and political groups.” Thus, when a group of Englishmen named the revolt a mere sepoy mutiny, the man like Disraeli, then an MP, argued in the House of Commons that “the Indian disturbance is not a military mutiny, but a national revolt”. Another Colonel G.B. Malleson, who later completed J.W. Kaye’s History of the Sepoy War, challenged the official theory of simple mutiny: “The crisis came: At first apparently a mere military mutiny, it speedily changed its character, and became a national insurrection.”

Conclusion: To conclude, it can be said that even after 150 years of the revolt, we can still feel its warmth and the debate that it emerges every time has enabled us to know something new. Theoretically, the revolt could not achieve its goal, with the use of superior armaments and proper planning; the colonialists were able to defeat the soldiers and recaptured Delhi. Bahadur Shah was taken prisoner and his two sons were killed. Nana Saheb was defeated at Kanpur, the Rani of Jhansi died on the battlefield, Maniram Dewan was arrested and hanged to death. Great revolt of 1857. The practical consideration is that the revolt

was not absolutely fruitless. It was the first uprising where the people from all sections made their contribution. We can pay our tribute to the revolt in the words of ex-Speaker of Lok Sabha, “The War of 1857 was undoubtedly an epoch-making event in India’s struggle for freedom. For what the British sought to derive as a mere sepoy mutiny was India’s First War of Independence in a very sense, when people from all walks of life, irrespective of their caste, creed, religion and language, rose against the British Rule.”

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