

# THE REVOLT OF 1857 AS THE FIRST WAR OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE

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**Abstract:** *The revolt of 1857 was the first war of India's Independence, because it was an eruption of the volcano of the various pent-up forces and feelings of the people of India. It came as a cultivation of the popular discontent with the British policies which had led to the great exploitation of the people. Because the every policy of the British i.e. political, social, economical, cultural and militancy was aimed at the benefit of the British people several sections of population felt suffocated under the tyranny of the British rules. They therefore revolted and attempted to the free themselves, so it can be say that the revolt of 1857 as a first war of Indian's Independence.*

**Key Words:** *Revolt of 1857, India's Independence and Effects of the First War.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The British rule in India began after the Battle of Plassey in A.D 1757. Within one hundred years a mere trading company emerged as a mighty political force. After a hundred years a mighty popular revolt broke out in 1857. It was the Indians who challenged against the British rule and attempted to put an end to it in 1857. The attempt has been called the First War of Indian Independence by most of the nationalist historians because a hundred years of the British rule had brought misery to the Indians i.e. the politically, socially, religiously, economically etc. India was divided into many small states by the English and frame many illegal laws and thereby annexed most of the states one by one. It created dissatisfaction among the Indian rulers and large numbers of the Indians those who were in the services in native the states. Economically too Indian people became poorer day by day. The English imposed heavy taxes on land revenue, Indians handicraft were destroyed and foreign trade was monopolized by the English. Even on the basis of merits Indian could not be appointed on high post as English were suspicious of them. Not only this, the English always degraded the Indian social status. According to them Indians were inferior race, "half guerilla half Negro" and uncivilized race of world. They did not permit the Indians to take part in their social activities and did not allowed to enter the waiting rooms, railway carriages and into the parks. Religiously the English were determined to convert the Indians into Christianity and militarily too, the English neglected the Indian soldiers. Indian soldiers required to do odd and hard jobs but were poorly paid. Therefore this outbreak of 1857 was in reality a product of accumulated grievances of the people against the company's administration. Popular discontent had been gaining strength among the different sections of Indian society. It was this discontent which burst forth into a mighty popular movement. "All class of people irrespective of the consideration of caste, creed or religion joined in this war" [Das:1998:19]. The peasants, merchants, artisans and soldiers fought bravely against the foreign government and their sacrifice constituted a brilliant chapter in the pages of Indian history.

Mangal Pandey hoisted the flag of rebellion on 29th March 1857. It became a full-fledged war when the military forces of Meerut cantonment raised the standard of rebellion on May 10, 1857 and the sky was rent with cries of "Delhi Chalo," "Maro Firangi Ko," Anyhow, it become a prelude to the long drama of the epoch making freedom movement that was to unfold in 1885 A.D. The causes of the revolt are to be found in those hundred years of the British rule to which the greased cartridges were the proverbial ignition which set the whole mine ablaze. In fact, the greased cartridges were merely the match that exploded the mine which had, owing to a number of causes been for a long time preparing. However, the resentment of the Indians found expression in a number of insurrections from time to time in different parts of the country like the Kol Insurrection of 1831-33, the Santhal rising of 1855-56 and many others. Various sections of population felt suffocated under the tyranny of the foreign rulers, so they tried to free themselves from foreign yoke. Freedom from foreign domination has been the yearning of all civilized people in every age of India and the Indian people were no exception to it. So they raised the standard of the revolt against the British rule in 1857. According to S.B. Chaudhuri the revolt was widespread and deep seated socially and that 1857 constituted a vast upsurge of the pupil from all sections of Indian society. Its essence was anti British, its aim was independence and its character patriotic and nationalist. The various rebel leaders cooperated with one another and fought outside their immediate district and territories and were motivated not by self-interest but by a wide vision and patriotism.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Historians have expressed divergent views about the revolt of 1857, some of them regarded it as a mere military revolt while others take it as a conflict between the black and the white races for supremacy. Some held the view that it was a peasants revolt the British historian's have ever been trying to call it merely a sepoy mutiny. Still some others consider that it was a conspiracy of the Hindus and the muslims against the English but the modern historian's do not recognize it as a struggle between the eastern and the western civilization and declared it to be the first war of Independence waged by the Indians.

### 2.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To highlight the revolt of 1857 as the first war of India's Independence
2. To study the effects of the first war of India's Independence

### 3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

While preparing this paper historical and analytical method will be follows bases on secondary sources like books, journals and magazine etc. The authenticity of the sources will be examined.

## 4. REVOLT OF 1857 AS THE FIRST WAR OF INDIA'S' INDEPENDENCE:

In 1757, the Battle of Plassey had laid the foundation of the British Empire in India. No doubt there were small and sporadic skirmishes here and there, but it took hundred years for the Indians to organize another revolt against the British in India. This revolt was a widespread public reaction against the British rule as secret emblems in the form of 'Chapattis' and 'Red Lotuses' were used to carry the message of freedom by the wondering 'Sanyasis' and 'faqirs' from village to village throughout the country. May 31,185 was the fixed as the day for the revolt throughout the country. This war of 1857, infamously called as the Sepoy Mutiny by some of the European historians and many other of them viewed as "The first combined attempt of many class of people to challenge the foreign power" [Chaudhuri:1957:297] was in fact India's First war of Independence . Historian S.N.Sen also prepared to invest the war of 1857 with the honor of a National war of Independence because the revolt of 1857 was in reality a product of the accumulated grievance of the people against the company's administration. Popular discontent had been gaining strength among the different sections of the Indian society. It was this discontent which burst forth into mighty popular war all section of Indian society irrespective of caste, creed and religion, peasants, merchant's soldiers fought bravely against the foreign government and sacrifice their lives. Even the common people in several areas rose up in arms, often fighting with axes, spears, arrows, lathis and sickles etc. "Government building were destroyed, the treasury was plundered, the magazine was sacked, barracks and court houses were burnt and prison gates were flung open" [Chandra:1989:35]. Their active participation and sacrifices constitute a brilliant chapter in the pages of Indian history. Because the sacrifices of the leaders during the revolt of 1857 were a source of inspiration for future freedom fighters. So it can be said that it for the first time gave birth to Indian nationalism.

The foreign scholars have named Indian attempt to overthrow the English and free their country Foreign Yoke, and a revolt, the nationalist historians regarded it as the first war of independence. It is true that its first and foremost aim was to uproot the English from India at any cost. From the letters written by the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah to the rulers of Rasputana, it became clear that the struggle was for the independence of the country. Bahadur Shah II had written a secret letters to the Rajput Princes i.e. "It is my ardent wish to see that Firangi is driven out of Hindustan by all. But the revolutionary war that is being waged for the purpose will not be crowned, with success unless a man capable of sustaining the whole burden of the nation will unify the whole people in himself, comes forward to guide the rising. I have no desire left for ruling over India after the expulsion of the British for my own aggrandizements. If all of your native Rajas are ready to unsheathe your swords to drive away the enemy, then I am willing to resign my imperial power and authority in the heads of any confederacy of native princes who are chosen to exercise it" [Bright: 1968:223]. It is the real evidence that the revolt of 1857 was the First War of India's Independence.

No doubt "the revolt was started by the solders but, later on people of all castes and religions joined it" [Khurana: 2012-13:175]. As is also evident from Bahadur Shah's letters, the man aim of this revolt was to turn out the English from India. Everyone was dissatisfied with the British and all Indians wanted to free themselves from their clutches. Economically they too becoming day by day even on the basis of merit, Indians could not be appointed on the higher post as the English were suspicious of them. India was divided into many small states. The English framed many illegal laws and thereby annexed most of those states one by one. It created dissatisfaction among the rulers too. Even this war broke out with the various accumulated grievances. It remained a shining example before nascent nationalism in India in its struggle for freedom from the British Yoke, and invested wish the full glory of the First National War of Independence against the British. Nana Saheb, Rani of Jhansi become national heroic and champion of National freedom, and stories of their struggle animated the fighters for freedom more than half a century later.

But many historians argue that it was not a first war of Independence, because it was confined only to the limited areas like Central and Northern India. But it is wrong evaluation. If the Swadeshi movement of Bengal which was originally confined to that province, could be called a National movement, why not the revolt of 1857, which covered the whole of Uttar Pradesh, some parts of Rajasthan, central India, western Bihar, Orissa and had its repercussion in Maharashtra, should deserve that title. As regards the that most people in the country had kept aloof and therefore it cannot be applied to Indians conditions in the middle of the 19th century. We know that the last quarter of the 18th century most of the France people had remained aloof from the French revolution of 1789, and yet no one dare to call it local movement. It was popularly known as the French revolution of 1789, in the world

So the revolt of 1857 can be said that as the First War of Indians Independence because those who took part in the revolt proclaimed their loyalty to the Mughal King. It was the result of widespread public reaction against the British. There was remarkable Hindu-Muslims unity, to face the Britishers during this struggle Hindu and Muslim were well represented at all levels of leadership. "In Delhi Bahadur Shah attempted to unite dissatisfaction heavy-handed and oppressive British administration with the arguments of the religious interference, and to bring Hindu and Muslims together in a holy war against the British [Masselos: 2005:28]. Because the Hindu and Muslims too were greatly dissatisfied against British. Hence this revolt was not of any particular community are rulers but all of Indians. It may be however, be admitted that the institutionalization of all Indian services like, the Indian police and Indian army one political and non caste basis promoted equality among the Indians, even though "wide discrimination and inequality existed between the Indian and Europeans [Pannikar: 1944:204-5]. Even the war was received the sympathy of the people, the country as a whole was not behind them. Had there been no popular support behind it the war would not have spread so quickly. "Dehli Chalo" "Maro Firange Ko" was the common slogan of this war of Independence.

The revolt was not merely sepoy mutiny. Because the discontent of the sepoy was not limited to the matters military, they reflected they general disenchantment with and opposition to the British rule. The sepoy in fact was a "peasant in uniform" whose consciousness was not divorced from that rural population. "Almost agricultural family in Oudh had a representative in the army, these were 75,000 men from Oudh" [Chandra: 1989:35]. The grease Cartridges was merely the match that exploded the mine which had, owing to a number of causes, been for a long time preparing. "It could be attempt to proved that the uprising of 1826, 1831, 1848 and 1854 were the rehearsal drama played in 1857" [Nanda: 2004:15]. It was much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Independence.

On the other hand different historians argued that this uprising was caused by the deposed rulers and Zamindar or their successors. But it is a wrong evaluation. History would bear witness to the fact that a large number of people took part in it and made supreme sacrifices to make their country free from British yoke "when the British annexed native states overthrowing the native rulers, large members of Indians who were in the service of these native states, were thrown out of their jobs and they could not find alternative jobs as the British service was not open to them" [Bright 1968:231].

After the feeling of various discriminatory policies of the British, the educated people also actively took part in this war against the British. Because the Charter Act of 1813 the Britishers insisted to the Indians to impart the English language. A large number of the educated Hindu and Muslims vehemently protested against the imposition of a foreign language.

On the other hand "the educated Indians were very much discontented as the higher civil services were kept reserved only for the Europeans and the Indians were kept aloof from such services"[Das:1998:16]. Thus the revolt of 1857 was occurred with the accumulated grievances of all sections of the peoples of India. So it became quite evident that the revolt of 1857 was the First War of India's Independence. This is the turning point in the history of India. No doubt, the British government had rested it on the strength of its power and resources, but the feelings of discontentment and nationalism continued to be nourished in the hearts of the people. A desire for freedom kept on burning in the hearts of Indian peoples. Thus it for the first time gave birth to Indian nationalism. So it can be said that the revolt of 1857 was the First War of India's Independence.

According to Vir Savarkar and many other Indian scholars call this rising as the first war of Independence rather than a sepoy mutiny. When Vir Savarkar tried to present the actual picture of this rising he was not only persecuted but also a ban was imposed on the publication of his book which he had to get published in Holland. In this book the war of Independence Vir Savarkar admits that the Indian sepoys were the main brunt of the fighting and were the mainstay of the rebellion, but it was because in India the general people never regarded it their duty to fight. No doubt, the Indian soldiers fought against the English in 1857 but thousands of Indian people took part in it though they did not do the actual fighting. Surely it was something more than a mere sepoy rebellion or the rebellion of the selfish Indian rulers. It was a national uprising. The causes of this rising lay quite deep. The Indian people as a whole were tired English Imperialism and they wanted to get rid of it. The use of grease cartridges only did the work of a spark to light the vast hoard of materials which had been collected for the last year or so.

## 5. EFFECTS OF THE WAR :

The war of 1857 gave the dead block to the all and the outdated British administration in India. The British authorities in India realized the consequences of attempting to govern a vast country like India in the most irresponsible manner and in total disregard towards the wishes and sentiments of the Indian people. So, they began to devise ways and means for knowing the Indian minds. The British had become extremely distrustful to Indians in general and the high caste Hindus in particular and began to treat themselves as a garrison, occupying a country which might always break out in a sudden rebellion. It was thought that Lord Dalhousie's reformist policy legislation affecting Hindu social life were responsible for uprising. After 1857, the British decided not to interfere with religious and caste question. Even the "the mission adopted in Bentinck's time to convert Indians to English man was abandoned after 1857" [Stein:2006:226-27]. After the war of 1857, the British administration was streamlined. But, apart from the general developments in the administration, the Indian war of 1857 led to the three major changes of policy. "The Government of India act of 1858, passed by the British parliament, ushered in a whole new era for India with incalculable effects on the people of India" [Ponnappa:2003:252]. There was no substantial change in the system of government. The Act provided improvement of the machinery by which the Indian government was to be superintended and control by the Britain. The war of 1857 led to the complete reorganization of British army in India. Steps were taken to strengthen the British element in the Army. More importance was given to ensuring loyalty and efficiency. "The policy of balance and counterpoise was deliberately furthered in the Indian army. Various groups were so arranged as to prevent any sentiment of national unity growing among them and tribal and communal loyalties and slogans were encouraged" [Nehru:1946:390]. The war of 1857 also compelled the British authorities to adopt a completely new attitude towards the Indian princely states for the purpose of having a better balance of power. The Indian Princes and Nawabs enjoyed great support and loyalty of the people and the British realized that to perpetuate their rule in India, unhindered and unprotected, they must win the loyalty of the ruling dynasties of India. The right of adoption of the rulers was recognized and the British policy of annexation of their territory was abandoned. The Queens proclamation of November 1, 1858 gave the assurance to the princes that the crown would regard their right, dignity and honor as our own. It may, however, be pointed out that the British were extremely vindictive and they brutally suppressed the war and a reign of terror was let loose after the war was over. The English killed their prisoners without trial and in a manner held by all Indians to be the height of barbarity sewing Muhammadans in pig-skin smearing them with pig fat before execution and burning their bodies and forcing Hindus to defile themselves. They also massacred thousands of civilian population not only in Delhi, but also destruction and all the men inhabiting them were slaughtered and the indiscriminate burning of their inhabitants occurred wherever our armies moved. The failure of war of 1857 convinced the Indians that the sporadic acts of violence or the methods of blood and bomb would not succeed to win independence without proper organization and rousing the popular consciousness against the foreign ruler. Thus in the post war period attempts were made to organize people and to generate among them a real desire to liberate India from the shackles of British authority. Attempts were made to reform the society in order to make them free from the bonds of age-old customs, superstitions, traditions and dogmas, in order to enable them to achieve political and economic advancement.

After the war of Independence of 1857, the crown took over the powers of administration from the hands of the company. "The governor general became the Viceroy and it abolished the board of control and court of Directors" [Chakravarty: 1992:86]. Their place was taken by the secretary of the state for India and the Indian council. The secretary of state was empowered to superintendent, control and directs the Indian affairs. He was a member of the British cabinet, but his salary and that of his establishment was paid from the Indian revenue. The reorganization of the army was another important outcome of the war of 1857. "The government brought about some modifications in the British Indian army after the revolt of 1857" [Nanda:2004:20]. As the company had now ceased to exist, the soldiers were considered to be the soldiers of the crown. The proportion of the British troops to Indian sepoys was increased to one-half in Bengal and Punjab, while in Madras and Bombay it was one-third. The Indian army was divided into two parts; an Indian army under British officers and units of British army in India. A commander-in-chief was appointed for the whole of the Indian army, but he was to be under the control of the Viceroy. The monopoly of the British over high civil services was also kept intact. "The Indian councils act of 1861 was an important enactment of the period" [Das:1998:23]. This act provided for an annual competitive examination for recruitment to the covenant civil service. But the venue of the examination was kept in London. Besides the rules concerning it were so framed that the Indians were virtually kept aloof from the services for a long time. Economic exploitation of the Indians increased further after the revolt. Of course, certain beneficial measures like development of transport and communication, irrigation and agriculture, sanitation etc. as a result of which the Indian people were deprived of their profits. The period after the war was marked with intensification of racial hatred and bitterness, contempt, ferocity became marked features of the English character in India. The Indians on their part remained hostile towards their rulers for many years to come. The war swept the Indian sky clear of many clouds but at the same time, it ushered in several revolutionary effects. As far as the British were concerned, the danger from feudal India came to an end once

and for all. But the British had, from now on to face the new challenges from progressive India inspired by the English liberals. Another important effects of the war of 1857 was that the Indian people looked upon the war as a symbol of challenge to the British imperialism in India which helped the growth of Indian nationalism. The Indian freedom fighters were greatly inspired by the deeds of Rani of Jhansi, Nana Saheb and others who were held in great esteem as national heroes and champions. The memoirs of the great deeds of these leaders were kept alive through popular songs and ballads and continued to inspire the Indian masses to fight against the foreign yoke. Thus the effects of the war of 1857 on India's freedom movement cannot be overlooked.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

Thus the revolt of 1857 began from Meerut, 10th km from Delhi on 10th may 1857 and then gathering force rapidly embraced a vast area from Punjab in the north to Narmada in the south and from Bihar in the East to Rajputana in the West. Several political, social, economic, religious and military and immediate cause or grievances of the various sections of pupils irrespective of caste, creed and religion had combine together for the outbreak of these first war of India's Independence of 1857. The "Delhi chalo", " Maro Firangko" was the common slogan of this war. But the ruthless repression of atrocities ended the chapter of the revolt with the hanging of Tantia Tope on 18th April 1859, including the numbers of people of India. But effects of the war of 1857 on Indian history cannot be overlooked. It resulted in significant changes in administrative structure. "The crown assumed the direct administration of India which however, was only formal" [Prokash 2004:389]. Thus it brought far reaching political , social, economic, religious and military changes in the history of British India. So the war of 1857 was an epoch making in the history of India. This outbreak of 1857 was a watershed in the British Indian history. It brought about revolutionary changes in the national life of India. "It was an organized national movement. Its great principles were 'Swadarma and Swaraj', in these two, lies the root principle of the revolutionary war" [Savarkar 1949:7]. The sacrifice of the leaders during the war of 1857 were a source of inspiration for future freedom fighters. The war became a symbol of challenge to the British. Thus it became quick evidence that the war of 1857 was a turning point in the history of India. No doubt, the British government had crushed it on the strength of its power and resources, but the feelings of discontentment and nationalism continued to be nourished in the heart of the Indians. A desire of freedom kept on burning in the hearts if Indian Patriots. So it can be said that the revolt of 1857 for the first time gave birth to Indian Nationalism.

We must remember that always a successful war of independence is branded as a rebellion or a mutiny. The game of politics never allows a political vacuum to continue for indefinite period and if the Indians had succeeded in driving out the British, they would have equally become successful in providing a united and organized government for themselves. In a war for national independence it is not material or significant as to how many people join the war, what is important is their dedication and commitment. The success or otherwise or such a war should not be identified with victory and defeat respectively. If the war of independence is to be viewed as a series of continuous and prolonged battlements with the enemy with the ultimate aim of rousing consciousness in the country in driving out the foreign rulers, then the war of 1857, though militarily lost was politically most significant and produced far reaching consequences. Despite the Sepoy's limitations and weakness, their effort to emancipate the country from foreign rule was a patriotic act and a progressive step. If the importance of a historical event is not limited to its immediate achievements, the revolt of 1857 was not a pure historical tragedy. Even in failure it served a grand purpose: a source of inspiration for the liberation movement which later achieve what the revolt could not. Thus we can say that the revolt of 1857 was purely a struggle for India's independence which can be assumed as the foundation of Indian freedom and weakening of the British government.

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