



CAUSES OF THE REVOLT OF 1857: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF COLONIAL POLICIES

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ABSTRACT

Significant socio-political unrest against British colonial control culminated in the Revolt of 1857. Various scholars referred to as the Indian Rebellion. This article explores the various factors that led to this crucial rebellion. The uprising was not mere a military, it was the result of accumulated political, economic, social, and cultural concerns. The study emphasizes various reasons for the revolt such as British expansionist policies, the Doctrine of Lapse, the Subsidiary Alliance System, annexation of Awadh etc. Apart from this, the racial discrimination in civil services, economic exploitation, social and religious meddling contributed to widespread revolt in India. The study highlights the case that these interrelated complaints affected peasants, soldiers, rulers, and traditional elites. These combined to create a collective awareness that allowed the rebellion to cross caste, religious, and geographic barriers. In order to comprehend the uprising, the study focuses that how many policies worked together to undermine colonial authority and inspire resistance rather than analyzing each one separately.

KEYWORDS: Revolt of 1857, British expansionist policies, annexation, Doctrine of Lapse, collective discontent

INTRODUCTION

As the first major armed opposition to British control over the Indian subcontinent was the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It is remembered as a turning point in colonial history. The uprising was the result of decades of systematic concerns rather than a single occurrence. This includes such as the well-known cartridge scandal involving grease purportedly made from cow and pig fat. The administrative practices of the British East India Company had gradually undermined political independence, upended economic systems, and threatened cultural identity in a variety of Indian social groups. Through military conquest, diplomatic pressure, and administrative tactics that methodically weakened Indian monarchs. British power had grown significantly by the middle of the nineteenth century. These leaders, many of whom had initially assisted the Company, were marginalized more and more (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

As British colonial policies changed Indian institutions and society, soldiers, peasants, merchants, and traditional elites all faced economic hardship. Social displacement, and cultural unease at the same time. The main political, economic, and social factors that combined to create the circumstances for the 1857 uprising are examined in this research paper. It shows that rather than treating these complex grievances as separate phenomena, comprehending the revolt necessitates looking at their connections and cumulative effects. The examination then looks at particular colonial policies that caused unrest. That means territorial expansion, the Doctrine of Lapse, the annexation of Awadh, the Subsidiary Alliance System, discrimination in the civil service, and social-religious meddling (Bayly, 1988). These components are then combined in the research work to demonstrate how disparate complaints came together to form a cohesive rebellion.

Territorial Expansion and Political Destabilization

The biggest direct threat to Indian political autonomy was the East India Company's territorial expansion. The Company evolved from a commercial organisation into a military and political force. The beginning was the Battle of Plassey (1757) and cementing its dominance with the Battle of Buxar (1764). The subcontinent's independent political units were reduced from hundreds to mere shards throughout the nineteenth century as a result of its methodical annexation or subordination of Indian states. This expansion was made possible by two main mechanisms: the Doctrine of Lapse and the Subsidiary Alliance System. Lord Wellesley instituted the former, which compelled Indian rulers to give up authority over external affairs in exchange for maintaining British troops at their expense. Despite providing theoretical safety, the system led to political subjugation and financial dependence. States like Mysore and Hyderabad were progressively undermined politically and economically. The rulers who were directly impacted were not the only ones harmed psychologically. Despite official promises of safety and respect for indigenous authority, the increasing subjugation of surrounding states caused widespread unease among all Indian princes, creating an atmosphere of suspicion toward British intentions (Gupta, & . Chakrabarty, 2007).

The Doctrine of Lapse and Direct Annexations

Perhaps the most contentious tool of British imperial expansion was Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse (1848–1856). According to this principle, any princely state without a natural male successor would return under Company rule. Crucially, it directly contradicted centuries of Indian legal and religious history by rejecting adoption as a valid succession mechanism. Satara (1848), Jhansi (1853), and Nagpur (1854), among other places, were annexed as a result of the doctrine's implementation. The Jhansi case turned out to be especially important. The concept sparked active opposition even before 1857. It was seen by Rani



Lakshmbai's disobedience of the annexation order and her subsequent military resistance during the uprising. Thousands of troops, court officials, aristocrats, and dependents lost their jobs as a result of the program. In addition to the overthrown kings. For many, the annexations represented the illegality of colonial rule and British contempt for Indian culture. Indian elites were shown that allegiance offered no defense against annexation by the doctrine's selective application. This excluded states whose rulers continued to be completely helpful. The remaining confidence between Indian rulers and the Company was severely damaged as a result of this discovery (Pal, 2007).

The Annexation of Awadh (1856)

Perhaps the most direct cause of the 1857 uprising was the acquisition of Awadh in 1856. As a thriving, economically productive kingdom and a significant hub for Company sepoy recruiting, Awadh was strategically significant. A cooperative ally was destroyed when Governor-General Dalhousie annexed the state on the grounds of purported "misgovernance." It had a direct impact on thousands of soldiers whose families had strong ties to the area. The question of whether the misgovernance justification was a legitimate administrative concern or only a handy excuse for gaining valuable territory is becoming more and more prevalent among modern historians. The people of the area felt deeply betrayed when the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, was dismissed and banished to Calcutta. As a result of British tax practices, thousands of troops who had previously served in the Nawab's army were displaced. Taluqdars (landowners) became impoverished, and traditional agrarian ties were upended. Awadh's concentration of complaints—political humiliation, economic relocation, military unemployment, and the breaking of close social-cultural ties was crucial in igniting the uprising. Awadh became the epicentre of the insurrection as soon as it broke out in May 1857, with many sepoys actively taking part (Kulke, 1998).

Leader, aristocrats, courtiers, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Feroz Shah and others were familiar with company's model of dishonesty. On the basis of evidences it is said that the main objective of rebellion was restoration rather than revolution (Shukla & Rawat, 2026).

Economic Exploitation and Social Displacement

Beyond political reorganization, Indian society suffered greatly economically as a result of British policy. Peasants faced previously unheard-of pressures due to high land tax expectations. It made harder for many of them to survive. Rigid, exploitative British assessments that put tax collection ahead of peasant sustainability. It replaced traditional revenue systems that balanced extraction with local welfare principles. Taluqdars, the landed nobility who had retained local power and supplied vital socio-political connections, were displaced by land reforms. Traditional Indian artisan and merchant groups were devastated by the entry of low-cost British-manufactured goods, especially textiles. Due to this, destroyed livelihoods that had been established over many generations. Thousands of troops lost their military jobs as native forces were reduced as a result of annexations. Many of them went on to actively participate in the

uprising. Peasants, merchants, artisans, and soldiers all experienced material displacement as a result of these simultaneous economic changes. The rebellion's geographical and social reach was aided by this widespread economic hardship. As people from a variety of professions voiced complaints about poverty brought on by the British (Roy, 2011) (Chandra, 1992).

Racial Discrimination in Civil Services

The Company's administrative apparatus needed to grow as geographical control did. The British established a segregated public service dominated by European officers. Public service did not integrate Indian elites into governmental structures. Theoretically available to all British subjects, the Indian Civil Service (ICS) proved to be virtually inaccessible to Indians. The main reasons for it was due to curricula emphasizing Western classical education that Indian students were unfamiliar with and exams that were only held in London. Even the few Indians who were able to enter the civil service were subjected to institutionalized prejudice in terms of authority, pay, and promotions. British officials continued to hold all or almost all of the important administrative roles, such as commissioners, judges, and district collectors. A strong message was conveyed by this racial stratification: colonial rule was based on presumptions of European superiority and Indian incapacity to govern (Sen, 1957). Exclusion from genuine political engagement was a source of deep humiliation for educated Indians and traditional elites, undermining colonial claims to fair or impartial governance. The very Indian elites whose cooperation would have justified colonial rule were repelled by the discriminatory public service structure. Rather, it strengthened the idea that ethnic dominance, not administrative effectiveness or fairness, was the foundation of British power (Metcalf, 1997).

Social and Religious Interference

Social and religious meddling caused more profound psychological concerns. British political and economic actions produced tangible material frustrations. The religious underpinnings of Indian civilization were deeply ingrained, and any outside meddling in sacred rituals endangered cultural identity. Conservative organizations perceived progressive British measures, such as the legalization of widow remarriage and the eradication of sati. As foreign intrusions on religious affairs, notwithstanding their humanitarian intent. These worries were exacerbated by Christian missionary work and the expansion of English-medium schooling. There were rumors that the government planned to convert people to other religions in a systematic way. These rumors gained credibility through selective evidence. The Religious Disabilities Act (1850), which allowed Christian converts to inherit property, seemed to offer financial incentives for giving up ancestral religions. Religious fear was exacerbated by the violation of traditional caste principles by train travel and caste mixing. These developments gave traditionalist Muslims and Hindus the impression that British rule posed a danger to the fundamental tenets of Indian civilization. Crucially, these religious fears were neither unreasonable nor exclusive to the ignorant. Threats to cultural survival were legitimately identified by educated religious



scholars and community leaders. This pervasive fear transcended sectarian boundaries. Bringing Hindu and Muslim elites together in a common concern for cultural preservation, a crucial unifying element in the multi-religious, multi-communal nature of the uprising (Dalrymple & Anstey, 2015).

Cumulative Impact and Transformation of Discontent into Rebellion

Although each type of grievance, political, economic, social, and military. It contributed independently to unhappiness, their combined, interrelated effects led to the rebellion's size and scope. British policies targeted several facets of Indian life and identity at the same time, rather than operating in a vacuum. Revenue policies may cause economic hardship for a peasant; military discrimination and religious anxiety may be experienced by a soldier. Territorial loss and subordination may be witnessed by a prince; and commercial destruction and religious threats to his faith may be witnessed by a merchant (Kulke, H & Rothermund, 1998). This combination of complaints turned out to be important. Through specific reforms, individual dissatisfaction may be controlled, contained, or addressed. However, individual complaints solidified into a shared understanding of British rule as essentially exploitative (Wagner, 2010).

Illegitimate when political dispossession, economic suffering, cultural anxiety, and military discrimination struck concurrently across different social strata. Even though the cartridge controversy of 1857 was historically significant as the immediate trigger. It was the most recent example of cumulative disrespect for Indian dignity, religious sensibilities, and cultural traditions. Why it unleashed this accumulated resentment? If authority remained culturally legitimate, sepoys could put up with low wages and unfavourable working conditions. However, after decades of racial discrimination, economic hardship, political defeat, and social meddling, the cartridge issue became the tipping point that turned dormant discontent into active rebellion (Stokes, 1986).

CONCLUSION

The Revolt of 1857 resulted from decades of systematic degradation of Indian political sovereignty, economic welfare, cultural identity. Human dignity rather than from an impulsive or fleeting military grievance. The Doctrine of Lapse and territory annexations, two of the East India Company's expansionist strategies, ended independent Indian authority. While instilling fear in the remaining princes. Peasants, merchants, artisans, and displaced soldiers were impoverished as a result of economic changes brought about by tax extraction, land confiscation, and market devastation. Both Muslims and Hindus were deeply concerned about the survival of their cultures due to social and religious encroachment. Racial discrimination in administrative institutions communicated presumptions of European superiority while preventing Indian elites from meaningfully participating in governance. These distinct colonial control techniques interacted and strengthened one another. In result, what may be called an all-encompassing system of dominance that impacted almost

every aspect of Indian society. Religious communities feared systematic cultural disintegration. Peasants faced economic suffering; businessmen endured commercial destruction; rulers lost kingdoms; warriors lost jobs and faced cultural disdain; and educated elites risked racial marginalization.

The scope and ferocity of the uprising were not solely due to the depth of military complaints. Instead of the unification of previously dispersed dissatisfaction into a shared understanding of the basic illegitimacy of British rule. When thousands of sepoys from various locations and backgrounds, together with princes, peasants, merchants, and rural people, revolted in unison. They voiced long-standing complaints that included social, political, economic, and cultural aspects rather than fleeting rage. Therefore, the Revolt of 1857 is much more than a military incident. It is a mass manifestation of Indian society's rejection of colonial control following its all-encompassing attack on political independence, economic well-being, cultural identity, and human dignity. In order to understand Indian colonial history and the eventual rise of organized nationalist groups that would eventually achieve independence in 1947. It is still necessary to know this intricate causal relationship.

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