Learning Outcomes

- Beginning of the Revolt of 1857
- Causes of the Revolt of 1857
- Main centres and leaders of the Revolt
- Consequences of the Revolt
- Nature of the Revolt of 1857

In the century after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British had established themselves as the supreme power in India, eliminating all potential rivals. They had conquered many areas and expanded their dominion over large parts of India.

However, the British expansion was accompanied by unjust, exploitative, and oppressive policies that served to further British interests. These policies caused poverty and untold miseries to the people and had an adverse effect on all segments of the Indian society.

There were sporadic rebellions and protests against the British policies. However, they could not shake the foundation of British rule in India.

The Revolt of 1857 was a large-scale revolt against the British that started within the ranks of the army and soon spread to other areas. British historians refer to it as Sepoy Mutiny. Indian historians call it the First War of Independence.

**ACTIVITY**

Why do British historians describe the Revolt of 1857 as 'Sepoy Mutiny'?

**Causes of the Revolt of 1857**

The Revolt of 1857 was the culmination of popular discontent against several British policies.

**POLITICAL CAUSES**

The forceful expansionist policy of the Company created widespread resentment among Indian rulers.

- Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse was a major cause of resentment among Indian rulers. According to the Doctrine of Lapse, kingdoms where the rulers died without a natural male heir would pass into the hands of the British. Dalhousie annexed the states of Jhansi, Nagpur and Satara under this doctrine.
- Dalhousie refused to acknowledge the rights of Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. Since he was not recognised as the legal heir, he was deprived of the pension his father had been getting. Nana Sahib became an important leader of the Revolt.
- Dalhousie also interfered in the internal affairs of the states that had signed the Subsidiary Alliance.
ECONOMIC CAUSES

Economic exploitation by the British and the complete destruction of traditional economic structure left both the peasants and artisans impoverished.

- India became a major colony of the British, providing cheap raw materials like cotton and silk to the rising British industries in the nineteenth century. In addition to this, heavy duties were imposed on Indian handicraft products entering England to protect the English manufacturers and industries. Unrestricted entry of cheap machine-made products from England into the Indian market ruined the traditional handicraft industry as they could not compete with the cheap products from England. The Company made no effort to promote the traditional industry and trade in India. Artisans and craftsmen were devastated with this transformation of the traditional economic structure.

As rulers, how did the Company differ from the Mughals and the Sultans in their attitude to the subjects?

- The land revenue systems of the British aimed at extracting maximum revenue from the peasants. The high rates of revenue fixed by the Company led to great hardships among the peasants. They were oppressed by the zamindars and moneylenders. Some even lost their lands to the moneylenders. No part of the revenue collected from the overburdened peasants was used for development of agriculture.

- The landlords were insecure about their position. Thousands of jamis or estates were confiscated during the reign of Lord Bentinck and Lord Dalhousie when the landlords failed to produce written deeds of ownership.
After the annexation of Awadh, the British confiscated the land holdings of zamindars and talukdars. Therefore, they also rose in revolt against the British.

- There were problems related to law of the land and corrupt administration. The masses had to deal with the corrupt police, lower level officials and lower law courts.

- The upper and middle classes were excluded from high paid jobs in administration. Also, the disappearance of Indian states, which were annexed by the Company, led to large scale unemployment among those employed in the courts and administration of the states. The end of royal patronage caused impoverishment of artists, craftsmen, and religious preachers who were dependent on the Indian rulers.

**SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CAUSES**

The establishment of British rule was accompanied by the spread of western education and culture. They began to interfere in the social and religious life of the Indians. This caused apprehension and discontent among the people, who viewed the foreign culture as a threat to the Indian society and culture.

- The British introduced several social reforms like abolition of sati and female infanticide. It also legalised widow remarriage and advocated education of women. These reforms were seen as foreign intervention in the religious and cultural affairs of Indians.

- After the establishment of the British rule, Christian missionaries came to India in large numbers. Their activities hurt religious sentiments of the people and created a sense of suspicion and fear among the Indians.

- The introduction of western education in English medium destroyed traditional education system. It undermined the positions of the pundits and maulvis. The schools set up by the British were seen as instruments for conversion to Christianity.

- The British introduced railways, post and telegraph in India. Such innovations were alien to the Indians, who became fearful of British intentions.

- The judicial system introduced by the British was based on equality. Though the law was different for Europeans, all Indians were considered equal before law. This was believed to be an attempt to undermine the caste system and the privileges of the upper classes.

- The British followed a policy of racial discrimination and looked down upon the Indians. They did not interact with the Indians and humiliated them.

**MILITARY CAUSES**

The Revolt of 1857 started as a 'sepoy' mutiny, i.e., the rebellion by the Indian soldiers of the Company. Certain measures undertaken by the British government created resentment among the soldiers against the Company.

- Indian soldiers played a major role in the expansion of the British Empire. However, they were neither appreciated nor rewarded by the British for their efforts.

- Indian soldiers could never rise in the ranks of the army. All high military posts were reserved for the British. The highest position that an Indian soldier could hold was that of a subedar.
An act passed in 1856 required every new recruit to undertake **overseas service** if required. This hurt the religious sentiments of the Indian sepoys, as overseas travel at that time had socio-religious constraints associated with it.

The British officers treated Indian sepoys with contempt. They were considered as inferior beings and often humiliated by the British officers. The Indian sepoys were paid much less than their British counterparts. Even the lodging, food, and other services provided to them were far worse than those given to British soldiers.

Another cause for the sepoys' discontent was the **non-payment of foreign service allowance** or *bhatta* when serving in the region of Sindh or Punjab. This led to a reduction in the salaries of the soldiers.

Annexation of Awadh by Lord Dalhousie in 1856, which was home to many sepoys, further ignited their hatred and discontent towards the British rule.

Since the establishment of the British rule, there were numerous sepoy rebellions against it. Some such revolts took place in Bengal (1764), Vellore (1806), and Barrackpore (1824). All of them were however, ruthlessly crushed.

**IMMEDIATE CAUSE**

In 1857, the British introduced **Enfield Rifles** in the army. These rifles had cartridges which were rumoured to be greased with animal fat. The cover of these cartridges had to be bitten off before being loaded. It was believed that the fat of animals which hurt the religious sentiments of the Indians was used for this purpose. This was offensive both to the Hindu and Muslim sepoys and they refused to touch these cartridges. The British refused to understand their protests and instead punished those who defied their orders.

On 29 March 1857, **Mangal Pandey**, a young sepoy of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry regiment of the British East India Company posted at Barrackpore, refused to use the cartridge and fired at his superior officers. He was executed for his defiance.

However, his act of single-handed rebellion was seen as a sign of bravery and Pandey was declared a martyr by fellow comrades.

**Main Centres and Leaders of Revolt of 1857**

**MEERUT**

The Revolt started in Meerut when soldiers refused to use the cartridges and rose in revolt. They stormed the jail, released many prisoners and killed several British officials. Then they marched to Delhi.

**DELHI**

When the revolting soldiers from Meerut reached Delhi, they were joined by the local infantry, who killed their British counterparts and seized the historic city. The rebels proclaimed the powerless Mughal Emperor **Bahadur Shah Zafar** as the leader of their revolt, declaring him as the Emperor of India. This made Delhi the centre of the Revolt and Bahadur Shah Zafar its symbol. News of the restoration of the Mughal rule and the end of the British rule spread far and wide. Thus, the sepoy mutiny transformed into a **revolutionary war** against the British rule.
GLOBAL CONNECT

In 1850, a popular uprising—Taiping Rebellion—emerged in southern parts of China. It lasted till the mid-1860s. Hong Xiuquan led many poor people to fight for the establishment of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace.

However, the revolt in Delhi was short-lived. The British retaliated with brutal suppression. Governor-General Canning gathered forces from other areas and proceeded to Delhi. The British recovered Delhi in September 1857. Thousands were massacred and hanged.

Bahadur Shah Zafar was exiled to Rangoon and the royal princes were killed. This marked the formal end of the great Mughal Dynasty.

The siege of Delhi by the rebels inspired revolts in other parts of the country—North-Western Province, central India and Bihar. Many princely states remained loyal to the British, but their sepoys revolted and joined in.

Did you know?

Three Mughal princes, Bahadur Shah Zafar’s sons, Mirza Mughal and Khizr Sultan, and grandson Mirza Abu Bakr, were shot by William Hudson at the Khooni Darwaza during the Revolt.

KANPUR

Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II, led the Revolt in Kanpur. With the help of the sepoys, he expelled the British officers from Kanpur and emerged as their leader, proclaiming himself the Peshwa. He recognised Bahadur Shah Zafar as the Emperor of Hindustan and declared himself as his Governor.

However, British troops defeated him and captured Kanpur. Nana Sahib evaded capture and escaped to Nepal.

Tantia Tope, a loyalist of Nana Sahib, fought valiantly against the British. He was captured and executed by the British.
LUCKNOW

The Revolt in Lucknow was led by Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, who proclaimed her young son Birjis Kadr as the Nawab of Awadh. With the help of the rebels consisting of the disbanded soldiers of the old Awadh army and local people, she attacked the British forces at Lucknow. The British Commissioner of Lucknow, Sir Henry Lawrence, fortified his position inside the Residency compound but was killed in the siege. The British were besieged inside the Residency for a long time. However, soon new reinforcements from England rescued them and suppressed the rebellion. Many rebels were executed. Begum Hazrat Mahal escaped to Nepal.

JHANSI

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi joined the Revolt when the British refused to acknowledge her adopted son as the heir to the throne of Jhansi and annexed it under the Doctrine of Lapse.

The Rani of Jhansi fought valiantly but was killed in the battlefield. Gwalior was taken back by the British in the next three days. Rani Lakshmibai became a symbol of bravery, courage and was known for her brilliant military tactics. She became a source of inspiration for the coming generations, symbolising the spirit of freedom.

BIHAR

The Revolt in Bihar was led by Kunwar Singh, a discontented zamindar of Jagdishpur, near Arrah in Bihar. He was an outstanding military leader and strategist of the Revolt. He fought the British in Bihar and later joined Nana Sahib's forces. He also participated in the Revolt at Awadh and Central India. He was defeated by the British and in 1858, he died in his village Jagdishpur.

Did you know?

During the Revolt of 1857, about 250 martyrs of Basti district of Uttar Pradesh were hanged by the British Government from peepal trees in Chhawani.

Consequences of the Revolt of 1857

By the end of 1859, British authority was completely re-established throughout the Indian subcontinent and the Revolt was crushed. It is considered a glorious landmark in Indian history.

The Revolt of 1857 was seen as the first great struggle for freedom against British imperialism.

- The rule of English East India Company came to an end after the Revolt of 1857.
- British Parliament Act passed in August 1858 brought India under the direct rule of the British Parliament and the Queen of England. Queen Victoria was declared the Empress of India in 1876.
- A member of the British Cabinet was appointed Secretary of State for India and
made responsible for all matters related to the governance of India. He was given a council to advise him, called the India Council.

- The Governor-General of India was given the title of Viceroy, that is, a personal representative of the Crown.
- Queen Victoria issued a proclamation stating the British intention of looking after the welfare of the people of India.
- The act of the Parliament and the Queen's proclamation led to the restructuring of existing political and social set-up of the British rule in India.
- All ruling chiefs of the country were assured that their territory would never be annexed in future. They could pass on their kingdoms to their heirs, including adopted sons. However, they had to acknowledge the British Queen as their Sovereign Paramount.
- Treaties with Indian states would be honoured.
- All rebels were pardoned, except those charged with murder of British officials.
- Indian Civil Services was created, where Indians were given high posts on merit.
- Army was reorganised and strengthened. Proportion of Indian soldiers in the army was reduced and the number of European soldiers was increased.
- It was also decided that instead of recruiting soldiers from Awadh, Bihar, central India and south India, more soldiers would be recruited from among the Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans.
- The British decided to respect the customary religious and social practices of the people in India.
- Policies were made to protect landlords and zamindars and give them security of rights over their lands.

Nature of Revolt of 1857

There has been great debate around the nature of the Revolt of 1857. Some scholars opine that it was a spontaneous act of defiance. Others believe that it was a result of a planned out secret organisation. The study of the history of 1857 uprising is entirely based on the official British records. There are not many records left by the rebels as they worked illegally. Also, with their defeat and suppression of the Revolt, the rebels and their version of history also got suppressed.

The Revolt of 1857 could not be considered just a 'Sepoy Mutiny' as it was a culmination of the years of discontent and hatred against the British.

- Different Indian kingdoms and sections of the society had their own motives and reasons for dissatisfaction. They were all united against the British. They had one goal and that was to drive away the British from the country.
- The Revolt of 1857 fostered Hindu-Muslim unity. It brought together people from different segments of society.
- The popular character of the Revolt could be witnessed with the widespread participation of the peasants and artisans. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the peasants and zamindars took this opportunity to attack the money lenders and new zamindars who had displaced them from their lands. They destroyed the account books of money lenders and records of debts.
- Most of the casualties of the Revolt were civilians or common people. Out of about 1,50,000 people killed, 1,00,000 were civilians. Thus, the Revolt of 1857 was much more than a sepoy mutiny. It was the first great struggle for freedom against British imperialism.
### Timeline

- **1857**: Outbreak of the Revolt
- **1900**: Queen Victoria declared Empress of India

### Concept Map

#### The Revolt of 1857

**Causes**
- Unjust political policies of British government
- Oppressive economic policies that impoverished masses
- Activities of Christian missionaries and socio-religious interference
- Ill treatment and inadequate opportunities for Indian sepoys
- Immediate Cause: Use of cartridges rumoured to be greased with animal fat

**Main Centres and Leaders**
- Meerut
- Delhi – Bahadur Shah Zafar
- Kanpur – Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope
- Jhansi – Rani Lakshmibai
- Lucknow – Begum Hazrat Mahal
- Bihar – Kunwar Singh

**Impact**
- End of rule of East India Company
- India placed under direct rule of British Parliament
- Governor-General designated as Viceroy
- Promise to respect Indian rulers and treaties
- Reorganisation of army
Exercise

A. Fill in the blanks.
1. The Revolt of 1857 took place hundred years after the Battle of _____________.
2. The British denied pension to ________________, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II.
3. Under the British rule, highest position that an Indian soldier could hold was that of a _________________.
4. The British annexed ________________ on grounds of maladministration.
5. The Revolt of 1857 was termed as ________________ by British historians.

B. Name the following.
1. The rifle introduced by British which sparked off the revolt ________________
2. The place where the Revolt began ________________
3. Nominal leader of the Revolt, declared Emperor of Hindustan by rebels ________________
4. Leader of the Revolt in Kanpur ________________
5. The new title given to the Governor-General of India after the Revolt ________________

C. Choose the correct answer.
1. Who was the first ‘martyr’ of the Revolt of 1857?
   a. Mangal Pandey  
   b. Rani Lakshmi Bai  
   c. Nana Sahib  
   d. Bahadur Shah Zafar
2. During the Revolt of 1857, who was the Mughal Emperor of Delhi?
   a. Akbar  
   b. Bahadur Shah Zafar  
   c. Aurangzeb  
   d. Jahangir
3. From which city did Begum Hazrat Mahal lead the Revolt?
   a. Lucknow  
   b. Meerut  
   c. Kanpur  
   d. Delhi
4. With whose help did Rani Lakshmi Bai capture Gwalior?
   a. Mangal Pandey  
   b. Hazrat Mahal  
   c. Nana Sahab  
   d. Tantia Tope
5. Who led the Revolt in Bihar?
   a. Kunwar Singh  
   b. Lakshmi Bai  
   c. Tantia Tope  
   d. Nana Sahib

D. Answer the following questions in brief.
1. What objections did the sepoys have to the new Enfield Rifle?
2. What was the bhatta?
3. Where did the first act of rebellion take place?
4. Who helped Rani Lakshmibai during the Revolt?
5. What was the role played by Hazrat Mahal in the Revolt of 1857?
E. Answer the following questions in detail.
1. What were some of the social and cultural causes that led to the Revolt of 1857?
2. Mention some political reasons for the Revolt.
3. The British economic policies caused hardship and discontent among the people. Explain how these policies fuelled the Revolt of 1857.
4. Describe the spread of the revolt and its main leaders. How did the British crush the Revolt?
5. How did the Revolt affect the future of India?

F. Snap Shot!
Observe the given picture and answer the questions.
1. Identify the person in the picture.
2. Name the sepoy regiment he was a part of.
3. How is he associated with the Revolt of 1857?

G. Map Work
On an outline map of India, mark any five important centres of the Revolt of 1857.

Life Skills
Rani Lakshimbai and Begum Hazrat Mahal were some important female leaders of the Revolt of 1857. However, there were many other women who fought in the revolt, or aided those who were fighting.
Find out about some such women fighters. Prepare a chart highlighting their contributions and share in your class.

Integration
An important record of the Revolt of 1857 are the paintings made by both the British and Indians. While some paintings commemorate the British soldiers who saved the Europeans from the rebels, others depict the ruthless suppression of the rebellion.
Find out about some such paintings and write a short note on their main theme.

Project
The Revolt of 1857 has been the subject of many films and literary works. Collect information on these and make a presentation in your class.