

4. The Freedom Struggle of 1857

In 1857, a great struggle took place in India which completely shook the British Government. This struggle did not arise all of a sudden. Earlier as well many such struggles took place in India against the British. The scope of the struggle of 1857 and its background was taken into consideration by V.D.Savarkar in his book 'The Indian War of Independence 1857'. Later many revolutionaries got inspiration from it to fight against the British.

Struggle before 1857 : At every place where the British rule was established in India, the local people had to bear the ill effects of British government. The Indians started feeling that they are

exploited in every strata due to the company's rule. This resulted in increase of discontent against their rule.

Farmers and common people became bankrupt during the company rule. In 1770, there was major famine in the Bengal province. But the British rulers were



Umaji Naik

indifferent and insensitive towards Indian people. From 1763 to 1857 the peasants of Bengal participated in the rebellion led by Sanyasi-Fakir. Similar revolts took place

in Gujrat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and South India. Umaji Naik also gave a strong fight. He organised the Ramoshis and the local youth to revolt against the British. They drew a declaration and appealed to fight against the British and overthrow the government. They inspired people in Pune, Satara, Ahmednagar, Solapur, Nasik, Bhore etc. In 1832, Umaji Naik was arrested and hanged to death in Pune.

The Indian tribes and forest communities also challenged the British rule. Their livelihood was dependent on forest resources. The British laws put restrictions on it. Consequently, Bihar, Kolam area of Chota Nagpur, Gonds of Orissa, Santhals of Bihar fought against the British. The Gadkaris from Kolhapur and Fond-Sawant from Konkan also challenged the British. Before 1857, some zamindars and royal class from different territories rebelled against the British.

In the army of East India Company there were many Indian sepoys. They



Do you know ?

Paika Rebellion : From mediaeval times, there was a system of Paikas existing in Odisha. The standing army of various independent kings were known as 'Paika'. Rent free lands were granted to them for cultivation by the king. The Paikas earned their livelihood through it. In return, they were supposed to stand by the king's side in case of eruption of war.

In 1803, the English conquered Odisha. They took over the hereditary rent free lands granted to the Paikas. This made the Paikas angry. Similarly, common man's life had also become miserable because of rise in salt price due to tax imposed on it by the British. This resulted in an armed rebellion of Paikas against the British in 1817. Bakshi Jaganbandhu Bidyadhar led this revolt.

were ill treated by the company. Their salary and allowances were very less compared to the British soldiers. In 1806 at Vellore and in 1824 at Barrackpore the revolt took up a fierce form.

All these rebellions took place in their respective territories. They were local in nature and single handed. The British forcibly broke down the revolts. Public unhappiness was suppressed but it did not vanish. This anger burst out in the freedom struggle of 1857. At various places the rebellion took place against the British. The discontent in the minds of diverse classes showed out in the form of this struggle and its outbreak was in the form of an armed rebellion.

Causes for the struggle of 1857 : During Pre British period there were many kingdoms in India. Whatever changes took place at the centre never affected the village system. The village system continued as it is. But the British changed the prevalent system and tried to set up a new system. Looking at the changing nature of village system created a feeling of instability and insecurity in the minds of the people.

Economic causes : The British introduced new revenue system to increase their income. Taxes were forcibly extracted from the farmers. As a result of it the agriculture system collapsed. To sell the British goods in India and enjoy profit was the policy of the British. They imposed heavy taxes on the local industries. The handicraft and textile industry of India were ruined. Many Indian artisans became unemployed. They had growing discontent in their mind against the British.

Social causes : The Indians felt that the Britishers were interfering in the culture, tradition and customs of India.

Sati prohibition, widow remarriage act were correct from social point of view, but the Indians thought that it is an interference in their lifestyle and hence they were dissatisfied.

Political causes : After 1757 the British took charge of many Indian states. Later Lord Dalhousie annexed many princely states on various causes. The Nawab of Ayodhya was dethroned on grounds of maladministration whereas the princely states of Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi were annexed through the doctrine of lapse. Due to the policies of Dalhousie the Indians did not consider the British as trustworthy.

Discontent among Indian soldiers : The Indian soldiers were given low status by the British officers. They could not gain any post higher than the Subhedar. They were paid less compared to the British soldiers. The allowances were also gradually decreased. Due to these reasons there was growing discontent among the Indian soldiers.

Immediate cause : In 1856, the British provided long range enfield rifles to the Indian sepoys. The sepoys were required to bite the end of the cartridges. The news spread out that these cartridges were smeared in the fats of cow and pig. Due to this the religious sentiments of Hindu and Muslim sepoys were hurt and made them unhappy.

The outburst : Disciplinary action was taken on those sepoys who refused to use the smeared cartridges and were given severe punishment. Mangal Pandey from Barrackpore cantonment shot an English officer as a reaction to unjust nature of British officers.

Mangal Pandey was arrested and hanged to death. This news spread like



Mangal Pandey

fire. The entire regiment of Indian sepoys at Meerut took part in the freedom struggle and marched towards Delhi. Thousands of Indians voluntarily joined them on the way. They handed

over the leadership of the freedom struggle to Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah and proclaimed him as the Emperor of India.

Scope of the struggle : The self confidence of the sepoys increased with the capture of Delhi. It also gave inspiration to other soldiers. The revolt soon spread in North India. The Indian soldiers revolted in cantonments from Bihar to Rajputana. The revolt spread in Lucknow, Allahabad, Kanpur, Banaras, Bareilly, and Jhansi. Later it spread to South India. In the revolt, Chhatrapati Pratapsingh of Satara and his officer Rango Bapuji, Chimasahab of Kolhapur, Babasaheb Bhamburda of Nargund, Bhagoji Naik of Ahmednagar were in the forefront. Royal queen of Peth, Sargana from Nasik district also participated in the struggle. In 1857, under the leadership of Kajari Singh, the Bhils revolted, whereas Shankar Shah led the revolt in Satpura region. 400 Bhil women participated in the revolt at Khandesh.

Leadership of the struggle : During the 18th C.A., after the weakening of Mughal Empire, invaders like Nadir Shah, Abdali attacked India. The Marathas understood that Mughal Empire cannot react to these foreign invasions and took up the responsibility of safeguarding India. The Marathas fought against Abdali at Panipat for the same reason. In the

freedom struggle of 1857 the descendant of Mughals, Bahadur Shah, was incapable of fighting against the British. Understanding the condition, Nana Sahab Peshwa, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi and Tatya Tope took up the charge of the freedom struggle of 1857. Its effect could be seen on the Hindu-Muslim unity in this struggle. Maulavi Ahmed Ali, Kunwar Singh, Mughal commander Bakht Khan, Begum Hazrat Mahal led the revolt in various regions. The nature of revolt in Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, West Bihar was more fierce.



Nana Sahab Peshwa

Crushing of the struggle : The Indians whole heartedly fought against the British, including soldiers, zamindars, kings, commanders and common people. The Indian sepoys started the freedom struggle before the fixed time. Initially they succeeded but military strength and



Tatya Tope



Rani Lakshmi Bai



Begum Hazrat Mahal



Kunwar Singh



administration of British rule was vast. The British crushed down the struggle by all means. The British made quick recovery and within next six months regained the lost territories. Rani Laxmibai, Kunwar Singh, Ahmedullah laid their lives.

Bahadur Shah was imprisoned at Rangoon. Nanasaheb and Begum Hazrat Mahal took shelter in Nepal, Tatya Tope fought for next ten months against the

British but due to betrayal he was caught and hanged to death. In this way, by the end of 1858, the British ruthlessly crushed down the struggle.

Even though the struggle began with the discontent among Indian soldiers, but later the peasants, artisans, common people, tribes came together to fight against the British. In this rebellion, Hindus, Muslims stood up with a great force. Their common aim was



Bahadur Shah

overthrowing the British from India. There was an inspiration of gaining independence behind this struggle and therefore this freedom struggle gained a national form.

Causes of failure of the struggle :

The struggle of 1857 became unsuccessful due to the following reasons-

The struggle was not comprehensive :

The struggle did not take place simultaneously all over India. Its intensity was more severe in North India, but Rajputana, Punjab, some parts of Bengal and North west India remained aloof.

Lack of central leadership : There was no commonly accepted leader to fight against the British. Due to this there was no uniformity in the struggle against British.

Most of the feudatory princes remained aloof : Just as the common people suffered due to British rule, similarly the princes also were suffering. But except a few others remained faithful to the British.

Lack of military tactics : Indian soldiers were brave but did not use tactics. They captured Delhi but could not retain it. Similarly, the Indian rebels had limited armed supply. The British had economic strength, disciplined army, enough stock of latest arms and experienced army generals. Since transport and communication was in the hands of British, their movements were swift. Due to this the Indian sepoys could not succeed. Wars are fought not only based on bravery but also through military strategies.

International situation was favourable to the British : The Crimean war with Russia was just over. The British won the war. They had trade relations with different countries in the world. The naval strength of British was vast. Whereas the Indian rebels were isolated.

Consequences of the Freedom Struggle- End of rule of East India Company

Due to the Company rule there was growing dissatisfaction among the Indians and the British rule had to face the struggle of 1857. It forced the British Parliament to end the rule of the Company and instead take over the responsibility of ruling over the people of India through the Government of India Act 1858. The Governor General was now designated as the Viceroy of India. Lord Canning happened to be the last Governor General and the first Viceroy of India. A new post called Secretary of State was created in the British Government to look after the affairs of India.

Queen's Proclamation : Queen Victoria of England issued a Declaration addressing the people of India. All Indians are our progeny. Henceforth they will not be discriminated on basis of race, religion, caste or birth place. Government services will be given on merit. There will be no interference in religious affairs. It was made clear that the British crown will honour all treaties and agreements made by the company with the rulers of princely states and no princely state will be annexed henceforth.

Change in composition of army : The proportion of British soldiers was increased in the army. English officers were placed at strategic locations. Artillery was kept exclusively in the hands of the British. There was division of military on basis of caste. Proper care was taken to

avoid Indians to unite and rebel again against the British.

Change in Policy : The British accepted the policy of non interference in social and religious aspects of Indians. They also started taking care that the Indian society will not be united on social grounds. They saw to it that there will be constant conflicts on grounds of caste,

religion, race, territory etc. They adopted the policy of polluting the minds of Indians by following the ‘Divide and Rule policy’.

Due to the freedom struggle of 1857, the Indians felt of giving a united fight against the British rule. The freedom struggle of 1857 became an inspiration of Indian freedom movement.

Exercise

1. Rewrite the statements by choosing the appropriate options.

(Umaji Naik, War of Independence, Lord Dalhousie, Secretary of State, Tatya Tope)

- (1) V.D.Savarkar named the struggle of 1857 as
- (2) united the Ramoshis to rebel against the British.
- (3) After the struggle of 1857 the post of was created in the British Government to look after the affairs of India.
- (4) was the Governor General who annexed the princely states.

2. Explain the following statements with reasons.

- (1) The Paikas made armed rebellion against the British.
- (2) There was discontent among the Hindu and Muslim sepoys.
- (3) The Indian sepoys could not keep stand in front of the British army.

- (4) After the struggle, Indian army was divided on the basis of caste
- (5) The British imposed heavy taxes on Indian industries.

3. Answer the following question in brief.

- (1) What were the social causes behind the struggle of 1857?
- (2) Why did the Indians fail in the struggle of 1857?
- (3) Write down the consequences of struggle of 1857.
- (4) What were the changes in British policy after the struggle of 1857?

Project

- (1) Search for the book written by V. D. Savarkar entitled ‘The Indian War of Independence 1857’ and read it.
- (2) On an outline map of India indicate the regions where the freedom struggle of 1857 took place.

