

EXCELL CAREER INDIA

THE REVOLT OF 1857

INTRODUCTION

The revolt of 1857 forms one of the most important chapters in the history of the struggle of the Indian people for liberation from the British rule. It shook the foundations of the British Empire in India and at some points it seemed as though the British rule would end for all time to come. What started merely as a sepoy mutiny soon engulfed the peasantry and other civilian population over wide areas in northern India. The upsurge was so widespread that some of the contemporary observers called it a national revolt.” The hatred of the people for the ferangis was so intense and bitter that one observer, W.H. Russell, was forced to write:

In no instance is a friendly glance directed to the white man’s carriage... Oh! That language of the eye! Who can doubt! Who can misinterpret it? It is by alone that I have learnt our race is not even feared at times by many and that by all it is disliked.

CAUSES

How did the Revolt break out ? What were its causes? The main reason for this was the ruthless exploitation of the Indian people by the British. The British rule which was formally established over the Indian people by the British. The British rule which was formally established after the Battle of Plassey in, 1757 in Bengal, strove to fill the coffers of the East India Company at the expense of the Indians. The East India Company was governed by greedy merchants and traders who could go to any

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extent to enrich themselves. The Company was formed in 1600, and was given a Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth which conferred on it the exclusive privilege to trade with the East. Its main aim was to assume the trade monopoly in India. It was not an ordinary merchant company formed for trade but had its train of soldiers who fought battles with the Portugues and the French trading companies in the 17th and 18th centuries in order to establish its trade monopoly. After these rival powers had been defeated it also tried to humble the Indian traders who offered competition. When the Battle of Plassey was won in 1757, the British successfully imposed their trade monopoly over the area under their control, eliminated competition from the Indian traders and forced the artisans to sell their products to them. The artisans were now paid so low that they could hardly survive. The legend has it that the weavers of Dhaka cut their thumbs to protest against such low payments by the East India Company for their superb work on muslin renowned for its fine texture.

Exploitation of the peasantry

Although the trade monopoly enriched the East India Company considerably, its main source of income was now derived from the land. After entrenching itself in Bengal, it spread its power in India through wars and treaties. To extract as much money as possible it devised new systems of land settlements- Permanent, Ryotwari and Mahalwari each more oppressive than the other. The Permanent Settlement which was effective in Bengal Presidency and in large parts of north India did not recognise the hereditary rights of the peasants on land, which they had earlier enjoyed. The loyal **Zamindars** and revenue-collectors were now given the proprietary rights on land. The cultivators were reduced to the status of simple tenants. But even the

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newly created landlords were not given absolute rights. Their situation was also deliberately left very precarious. They had to pay to the Company 10/11th of the entire rent derived from the cultivators and if they failed to do so. Their property was sold to others.

The other land settlements were no better. In all of these the peasants had to pay beyond their means and any adverse natural shifts like drought or flood compelled them to go of loans to the money lenders who charged exorbitant interest. This made the peasants so heavily indebted that they were ultimately forced to sell their land to these money lenders. It is because of this that the money lenders were so hated in rural society. The peasantry was also oppressed by petty officials in administration who extracted money on the slightest pretexts. If the peasants went to the law court to seek redress of their grievances, they were bound to be totally ruined. When the crop was good the peasants had to pay back their past debts; if it was bad, they were further indebted. This nexus between the lower officials, law court and money lenders created a vicious circle which made the peasantry desperate and ready to welcome any opportunity for change of regime.

Alienation of the Middle and Upper Strata of Indians

It was not merely the peasantry that got alienated from the British rule, the middle and upper strata Indians also felt oppressed. During the period of the Mughals or even in the administration of the local princes and chieftains, the Indians served at all the places both lower and higher. The disappearance of these Indian states and their replacement by the British administration deprived the Indians of higher posts which were now taken mainly by the British. Further more than cultural personnel like poets dramatists writers, musician's etc. Who were earlier

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employed by the native states were now thrown out. The religious men like **Pandits** and **Mauves** also lost all their former power and prestige.

Annexation of Princely States

The East India Company did not spare even former allies. The native state of Awadh was annexed by Dalhousie in 1856 on the pretext that Nawab Wazid Ali Shah was mismanaging the state. Even before this he had annexed Satara in 1848 and Nagpur and Jhansi in 1854 on the pretext that the rulers of these states had no natural heir to succeed them after their death. This annexation embittered the rulers of these states, making Rani of Jhansi and Begums of Awadh staunch enemies of the British. Further the British refusal to pay pension to Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II worsened the situation. The annexation of Awadh was also resented by the sepoys as most of who came from there. This action hurt their patriotic loyalty and sense of dignity. Moreover, since their relatives had now to pay more taxes on land, it adversely affected the purses of the sepoys themselves.

The Alien Rule

Another important reason of the unpopularity of the British was the alien nature of their rule. They never mixed with the Indian people and treated even the upper class Indians with contempt. They had not come to settle in India but only to take money home. So the Indians could never develop any affinity towards them.

Impact on the Sepoys

The revolt of 1857 originated with the mutiny of the Sepoys. These Sepoys were drawn mainly from the peasant population of North and North-West India. As we have seen, the rapacious policies followed by

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the East India Company were impoverishing and ruining the peasantry. This must have affected the Sepoys also. In fact, most of them had joined the military services in order to supplement their fast declining agricultural income. But as the Years passed, they realised that their capacity for doing so declined. They were paid a monthly salary of 7 to 9 Rupees out of which they had to pay for their food, uniform and transport of their private baggage. The cost of maintaining an Indian Sepoy was only one –third of his British counterpart I India. Moreover, the Indian Sepoy was treated roughly by the British counterpart in India. Moreover, the Indian Sepoy was treated roughly by the British officers. They were frequently abused and humiliated. The Indian Sepoy, despite his valour and great fighting capacity, could never rise above the rank of a **Subedar** while a fresh recruit from England was often appointed his superior overnight.

Threat to Religion

Apart from degrading service conditions, another factor inflamed the feeling of the sepoy. An impression was created among them that their religion was being attacked by the British. This belief was also shared by the general civilian population. The proselytizing zeal of the missionaries and some of the British official instilled fear in the minds of the people that their religion was in danger. At several places conversions to Christianity were reported to be made. The Government maintained the Chaplains at its own cost and in some cases also provided police protection to the missionaries. Even the army maintained chaplains at state cost and Christian propaganda was carried among the sepoy. Furthermore, the sepoy were forbidden to wear their caste marks, and in 1856 and Act was passed under which every new recruit had to give an undertaking to serve overseas, if required. The

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conservative beliefs of the sepoys were thus shaken and they sometimes reacted strongly. For example in 1824, the 47th Regiment of sepoys at Barrackpore refused to go to Burma by sea-route because their religion forbade them to cross “black water”. The British reacted ruthlessly, disbanded the Regiment, and put some of its leaders to death.

In 1844, seven battalions revolted on the question of salaries and batta (allowance). Even during the Afghan War from 1839 to 1842 the soldiers were almost on the verge of revolt. Like sepoys, the people of India had also risen in revolt against the oppressive British rule. The most important of these uprisings were the Kutch rebellion (1816-32), the Kol uprising in 1831 and the Santhal uprising in 1855-56. The main point with regard to the 1857 challenge, however, was that both the military and civilian revolts merged and this made it really formidable.

The Immediate Cause

The atmosphere was so surcharged that even a small issue could lead to revolt. The episode of greased cartridges, however, was a big enough issue to start the rebellion on its own. Dry tinder-box was there and only a spark was needed to set it ablaze. Cartridges of the new Enfield rifle which had recently been introduced in the army had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off before the cartridge was loaded into rifle. The grease was in some instances made of beef and pig fat. This completely enraged the Hindu and Muslim sepoys and made them believe that the government was deliberately trying to destroy their religion. It was the immediate cause of the revolt.

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ORGANISATION

What kind of organization did the rebels employ in order to raise their banner against the British? On this question there has been a good deal of controversy among historians. One view is that there was a widespread and well-organised conspiracy, while another view maintains that it was completely spontaneous. The fact seems to be that some kind of organized plan was in existence but it had not matured sufficiently when the revolt broke out.

But the stories which have come down to us talk about the red lotuses and **Chappatis**. Symbolising freedom and bread, being passes from village to village and from one regiment to another. Besides these means speeches were also delivered and quite preaching conducted by the roaming sanyasis and fakirs to mobilise and rally anti-colonial forces. All these stirred the sepoys to revolt.

THE REBELLION

On 29th March, 1857, young soldier, Mangal Pandey, stationed at Barrackpore. Revolted single-handedly attacking his British officers. He was hanged, and not much notice was taken of this event. But it showed the resentment and anger aroused among the sepoys. Less than a month later, on 24th April ninety men of the Third Native Cavalary, stationed at Meerut, refused to use the greased cartridges. Eighty – five of them were dismissed and sentenced to ten years imprisonment on 9th the May. The rest of the Indian sepoys reacted strongly to this, and the next day, on 10th May, the entire Indian garrison revolted. After freeing their comrades and killing the British officers, they decided to march on to Delhi. This shows that they did have in mind some sort of alternative to the British.

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Another thing which makes it clear that it was not merely army mutiny was that the people from surrounding areas began to loot the military bazaars and attacked and burnt the bungalows of the British as soon as they heard the shots fired by the sepoys on their officers. The Gujars from the surrounding villages poured into the city and joined the revolt. Telegraph wires were cut and horsemen with warning messages to Delhi were intercepted. As soon as the sepoys from Meerut reached Delhi. The Indian garrison also revolted and joined the rebels. They now proclaimed the old Bahadur Shah, as the Emperor of India. Thus in twenty-four hours, what began as a simple mutiny had swelled into full-scale political rebellion.

In the next one month the entire Bengal Army rose in revolt. Whole of North and North West India was up in arms against the British. In Aligarh, Mainpuri, Bulandshahr, Etawah, Mathura, Agra, Lucknow, Allahabad, Banaras, Shahabad, Danapur and East Punjab, wherever there were Indian troops, they revolted. With the revolt in army the police and local administration also collapsed. These revolts were also immediately followed by a rebellion in the city and countryside. But in several places the people rose in revolt even before the sepoys. Wherever revolt broke out, the government treasury was plundered, the magazine sacked, barracks and court houses were burnt and prison gates flung open. IN the countryside, the peasants and dispossessed zamindars attacked the money lenders and new Zamindars who had displaced them from the land. They destroyed the government records and money lenders account books. The attacked the British established law courts, revenue offices, revenue records and **thanas** (police stations). Thus the rebels tried to destroy all the symbols of colonial power.

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Even when the people of particular areas did not rise in revolt, they offered their help and sympathies to the rebels. It was said that the rebellious sepoys did not have to carry food with them as they were fed by the villagers. On the other hand, their hostility to the British forces was pronounced. They refused to give them any help or information and on many occasions they misled the British troops by giving wrong information.

In central India also, where the rulers remained loyal to the British, the army revolted and joined the rebels. Thousands of Indore's troops joined in Indore the rebellious sepoys. Similarly, over 20000 of Gwalior's troops went over to Tantya Tope and Rani of Jhansi. In the whole of north and central India the British power was limited only to the towns of Agra, and Lucknow. Elsewhere the entire British army and administration fell like a house of cards.

One of the most remarkable things about the rebellion was its solid Hindu-Muslim unity. The Hindu sepoys of Meerut and Delhi, unanimously proclaimed Bahadur Shah as their Emperor. All the sepoys, whether Hindu or Muslim, accepted the suzerainty of the emperor and gave the call "chalo Delhi"(onward to Delhi) after their revolt: Hindus and Muslims fought together and died together. Wherever the sepoys reached, cow-slaughter was banned as a mark of respect to the sentiments of the Hindus.

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LEADERSHIP

The storm-centres of the revolt were Delhi, Kanpur, lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi and Arrah. All these places threw up their own leaders who for all practical purposes remained independent, even though they accepted the suzerainty of Emperor Bahadur shah.

Bakht Khan

In Delhi Bahadur Shah was the leader. But the real power lay with the soliders. Bakht Khan, who had led the revolt of the soldiers at Bareilly, arrived in Delhi on 3rd July, 1857. From that date on he exercised the real authority. He formed a Court of soldiers composed of both Hindu and Muslim rebels. But even before that the soldiers showed little regard for the authority of the Emperor. Bahadur Shah deplored the army officers for their “Practice of coming into the Court carelessly dressed and in utter disregard to the form of respect to the royalty”.

Nana Saheb and Tantya Tope

At Kanpur the revolt was led by Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II, The rebellious sepoy also supported Nana Saheb and under his leadership both the military and civilian elements were united. They expelled the British from Kanpur and declared Nana Saheb Peshwa who acknowledges Bandur Shah as the Emperor of India. Most of the fighting was, however, carried on by Tantya Tope on his behalf, and was Tantya Tope who passed into the popular legend as a great patriot and anti-British leader

The Begum of Awadh

At lucknow the Begum of Awadh provided the leadership and proclaimed her son. Birji kadr, as the Nawab of Awadh. But here again,

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the more popular leader was Maulavi Ahmadullah of Faizabad, who organized rebellions and fought the British.

Rani Lakshmi Bai

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi was another great popular leader. She believed that she had been robbed of her ruling rights in defiance of recognized Hindu law. Though she showed some hesitation at the initial stage, she fought valiantly once she joined the ranks of the rebels.

Kunwar Singh

But the most representative and outstanding leader was Kunwar Singh of Arrah. Under his leadership the military and civil rebellion was so completely fused that the British dreaded him most. With a war band of about 5000 including about 600 Danpur sepoys and the rebellious Ramgarh state battalion he marched across hundreds of miles to reach Mirzapur, Banda and the vicinity of Kanpur. He reached up to Rewa state and it was thought that as soon as Rewa fell to the rebels, the British would be forced to move to the south. But, for some reasons, Kunwar Singh did not move southwards. He returned to Banda and then back to Arrah where he engaged and defeated the British troops. He was seriously injured and died on 27th April, 1858 in his ancestral house in the village of Jagdishpur.

The Unknown Martyrs

Apart from these acknowledged leaders who are remembered for their patriotism and courage, there were many unknown and unacknowledged but no less valiant leaders among the sepoys, peasantry and petty Zamindars. They also fought the British with exemplary courage to expel them from India. Peasants and sepoys laid down their lives for the

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cause of their country, forgetting their religious and caste differences and rising above their narrow personal interests.

DEFEAT

The British captured Delhi on 20 September, 1857. Even before this the rebels had suffered many reverses in Kanpur, Agra, Lucknow and some other places. These earlier reverses did not dampen the rebel's spirits. But the fall of Delhi, on the other hand, struck did not dampen the rebel's spirits. But the fall of Delhi, on the other hand, struck a heavy blow to them. It now became clear why the British concentrated with so much attention to retain Delhi at all cost. And for this they suffered heavily both in men and material. In Delhi, Emperor Bahadur Shah was taken a prisoner and the royal princes were captured, and butched. One by one, all the great leaders of the revolt fell. Nana Saheb was defeated at Kanpur after which he escaped to Nepal early in 1859 and nothing was heard of him afterwards.

Tatya Tope escaped into the jungles of central India where he carried on bitter guerrilla warfare until April 1859 when he was betrayed by a **zamindar** friend and captured while asleep. He was hurriedly tried and put to death on 15th April, 1859. The Rani of Jhansi died on the field of battle on 17th June, 1858. By 1859, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Maulavi Ahmadullah were all dead, while the Begum of Awadh escaped to Nepal. By the end of 1859, the British authority over India was reestablished, fully and firmly.

CAUSES OF FAILURE

There were many causes which led to the collapse of this mighty rebellion. Here we list some of them to you.

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Lack of a Unified Programme and Ideology

The rebellion swept off the British system of government and administration in India. But the rebels did not know what to create in its place! They had no forward-looking plan in mind. This made them rely on the outmoded feudal system with Bahadur Shah at its head. The other prominent leaders of rebellion like , Nana sahib, Begum of Awadh.

Lack of Unity Among Indians

As mentioned above, no broad based unity among the Indian people could emerge. While sepoys of the Bengal army were revolting, some soldiers in Panjab and south India fought on the side of the British to crush these rebellions. Similarly, there were no accompanying rebellions in most of eastern and southern India. The Sikhs also did not support the rebels. All these groups had their reasons to do so. The possibility of the revival of Mughal authority created a fear among the Sikhs who had faced so much oppression at the hands of the Mughals. Similarly, the Rajput chieftains in Rajasthan and Nizam in Hyderabad were so much harassed by the Marathas that they dreaded the revival of Maratha power. Besides this, there were some element of the peasantry that had profited from the British rule. They supported the British during the revolt. The Zamindars of Bengal Presidency were the creation of the British; and had all the reasons to support them. The same applied to the big merchant of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras who did not go over to the rebels but supported the British.

Lack of support from the Educated Indians

The modern educated Indians also did not support the revolt because, in their view, the revolt was backward-looking. This educated middle class

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was the product of the British system of education and they believed mistakenly that the British would lead the country towards modernisation.

Disunity among the Leaders

The main problem however, was lack of unity in the ranks of rebels themselves. Their leaders were suspicious and jealous of each other and often indulged in petty quarrels. The Begum of Awadh, for example, quarreled with Maulavi Ahmadullah, and the Mughal princes with the sepoy-generals. Azimullah, the political adviser of the Nana Saheb, asked him not to visit Delhi lest he be overshadowed by the Emperor Bahadur Shah. Thus. Selfishness and narrow perspective of the leaders sapped the strength of the revolt and prevented its consolidation.

Military Superiority of the British

Another major factor for the defeat of the rebels was the British superiority in arms. The British imperialism, at the height of its power the world over and supported by most of the Indian princes and chiefs, proved militarily too strong for the rebels. While the rebels were lacking in discipline and a central command, the British continued to have a constant supply of disciplined soldiers, war materials and money from British. Sheer courage supply of disciplined soldiers, war materials and money from British. Sheer courage could not win against a powerful and determined enemy who planned its strategy skillfully. Because of illdiscipline the rebels lost more men and material than the British in every encounter. Many sepoys, seeing that the British had an upper hand, left for their villages.

These were the main factors responsible for the failure of the revolt.

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IMPACT

Despite the fact that the revolt of 1857 failed, it gave a severe jolt to the British administration in India. The structure and policies of the re-established British rule were, in many respects, drastically changed.

Transfer of Power

The First major change was that the power to govern India passed from the East India Company to the British Crown through an Act of 1858. Now a Secretary of State for India aided by a Council was to be responsible for the governance of India. Earlier this authority was wielded by the Directors of the Company.

Changes in Military Organisation

The second drastic change was effected in the army. Steps were taken to prevent any further revolt by the Indian soldiers. Firstly, the number of European soldiers was increased and fixed at one European to two Indian soldiers in Bengal Army and two to five in Bombay and Madras armies. Moreover, the European troops were kept in key geographical and military positions. The crucial branches of the army like artillery were put exclusively in European hands. Secondly, the organization of the Indian section of the army was now based on the policy of divide and rule. Regiments were created on the basis of caste, community and region to prevent the development of any nationalistic feeling among the soldiers.

Divide and Rule

This policy of “divide and rule” was also introduced in the civilian population, since the British thought that the revolt was a conspiracy hatched by the Muslims the latter were severely punished and

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discriminations made against them in public appointment and in other areas. This policy was later reversed and a belated appeasement of Muslims began. A policy of preferential treatment of the Muslims was adopted towards the end of the 19th century. These policies created problems for Indian freedom struggle and contributed to the growth of communalism.

New Policy towards the Princes

Another important change was in the British policies towards the Princely states. The earlier policy of annexation neither was nor abandoned and the rulers of these states were now authorized to adopt heirs. This was done as a reward to those native rulers who had remained loyal to the British during the revolt. However, this authority of the Indian rulers over particular territories was completely subordinated to the authority of the British and they were converted into Board of Privileged dependents.

Search for New Friends

Besides these changes, the British now turned to the most reactionary groups among the Indians, like the **zamindars**, princes and landlords, for strengthening their fortune in the country.

ASSESSMENT

Having discusses various aspects of the rebellion, let us, in the end, see how the events of 1857 have been interpreted by the contemporary officials as well as by subsequent scholars.

The nature of the 1857 uprising aroused fierce controversy from the very outset. The official British explanation was that only the Bengal army had mutinied and civil disturbances were caused by the breakdown of

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law and order machinery. Many officials thought that it was only a mutiny. But this view was challenged by Benjamin Disraeli, the conservative leader, in July 1857. He 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”

Then he queried:

“Is it a military mutiny or is it a national revolt?”

The official view was challenged by a section of the British community in India also. Colonel G.B. Malleon, 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.

V.D. Savarkar, who gave a nationalist interpretation to the uprising, asserted in 1909 that it was the “Indian War of Independence.”

Savarkar’s views were supported by S.B. Chaudhary, who in his writings demonstrated that 1857 was a “rising of the people”. In fact, the historiographic tradition in India soon accepted this line of argument.

A discordant note was however, struck by R.C. Majumdar. He refused to recognize 1857 as a War of Independence. His view was that “to regard the outbreak of 1857 as either national in character or a war of independence of India betrays a lack of true knowledge of the history of Indian people in the nineteenth century”.

Some historians have held that the Muslim elite was responsible for inciting the trouble. Outram regarded the revolt as a “Muslim conspiracy

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exploiting Hindu grievances”. Yet another school of thought believes that during the revolt the people were fighting not only against the British but also against the feudal structure. The backsliding of these feudal chiefs led to the collapse of the revolt. Talmiz Khaldun wrote:”It was crushed so easily because of betrayal by the propertied classes”

Later Historiography, though accepting the popular character of the Revolt, laid emphasis on its backward-looking character. Bipin Chandra has stressed this point:

“The entire movement lacked a unified and forward looking programme to be implemented after the capture of power”

Tara Chand was more explicit when he wrote that the “Revolt of 1857 was the last attempt of an effete order to recover its departed glory”

Percival Spear added, “And it has been asserted to have been a purely military outbreak produced jointly by the grievances and indiscipline of the Indian troops and folly of the British military authorities. It is in fact an anachronism to describe the mutiny as the first essay towards modern independence. It was rather, in its political aspect, the last effort of the old conservative India”.

These, however, are only some of the interpretations offered. The debate is still going on. We hope to be enriched and enlightened by future research on the rebellion of 1857.

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VIEWS

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the so-called First National War of Independence of 1857 is neither First, nor National, nor war of Independence.

R.C. Majumdar

The Mutiny became a Revolt and assumed a political character when the mutineers of Meerut placed themselves under the king of Delhi and a section of the landed aristocracy and civil population decided in his favour. What began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence?

S.N. Sen

... had a single leader of ability arisen among them (the rebels), we must have been lost beyond redemption.

John Lawrence

The revolt of 1857 was a struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combine against foreign imperialism as well as indigenous landlordism.

Marxist Interpretation

Here lay the woman who was the only man among the rebels.

Hugh Rose

(a tribute to the Rani of Jhansi from the man who defeated her)

It was far more than a mutiny,.. Yet much less than a first war of independence.

Stanley Wolpert

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- **CENTRES OF REVOLT AND LEADERS**

Delhi - General Bakht Khan

Kanpur - Nana Saheb

Lucknow - Begum Hazrat Mahal

Bareilly - Khan Bahadur

Bihar - Kunwar Singh

Faizabad - Maulvi Ahmadullah

Jhansi - Rani Laxmibai

- **THE BRITISH RESISTANCE**

Delhi - Lieutenant Willoughby, John
Nicholson, Lieutenant Hudson

Kanpur - Sir Hugh Wheeler, Sir Colin Campbell

Lucknow - Henry Lawrence, Brigadier Inglis,
Henry Havelock, James Outram, Sir
Colin Campbell

Jhansi - Sir Hugh Rose

Benaras - Colonel James Neill

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