

Sepoy Mutiny

(On the completion of one hundred and fifty years)

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The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 is otherwise known as the First Indian War of Independence to free Mother India from the yoke of English race. Each and every student, professors and presently alive freedom fighters can not forget that this year 2006, one hundred fifty years of completion of Sepoy Mutiny is celebrated across the length and breadth of our motherland. In the last month (July), a preparatory committee under the chairmanship of Hon'ble Prime Minister has been constituted for its celebration in a grand manner.

It may be recalled that on 29th March 1857 at Barrackpur, which is 16 miles away from Calcutta, Mangal Pande broke the lines and called upon his comrades to strike a blow for their religion. In the succeeding weeks and months, there were repeated apprehension of outbreak of revolt at Calcutta, and the Europeans were in a state of prolonged panic. Outside Calcutta, there were risings and alarm in many places, for example Birbhum, Bankura, Jaspura, Krishnagava, Malda, Dacca, Faridpur, Bakargang, Tipperah, Syehet, Chittagond, Khosi and Jaintia hills.

The sun of independence of India was set in 1757, when Nawab Siraj-Udaullah became a martyr in the battle of Plassey in 1757 in the bullet of Lord Clive due to the blatant treachery made

by Mir-Jafar. Then for the Britons, it was 'Rule Britannia Rule'. It took another 100 years till 1857, and the Britishers became successful in annexing many provinces in their conquered map and by their diplomatic policy of Divide and Rule.

But the reason of outbreak of First Indian War of Independence was the greased cartridge. The part played by the greased cartridge in bringing about the revolt is unduly exaggerated, some eminent historians opine. Major Buntein, commanding the department of musketry at Dum Dum, testified that even though the Indian soldiers were greatly agitated about the greased cartridges, when he paraded them, at least two-thirds of the attachment immediately stepped to the front, including all the native commissioned officers. In a manner perfectly respectful, they distinctly stated their objections to the method of preparing cartridges for the new rifled market. General law, member of the supreme council, writing about the irregular infantry of Oudh, stated : "It appears to me, that probably the main body of this regiment in refusing to bite these cartridges, did so, not from any feeling of disloyalty or disaffection towards the Government or their officers, but for a sincere dread that the act of biting them would involve a serious injury to their caste and to their future respectability."

But the greased cartridge was only one among the numerous grievances of the sepoy. Its introduction added to his apprehensions and aggravated his existence. But the fact is that in the conditions prevailing then, the normal state of the Bengal Army was mutiny. How could it be otherwise? Indian Sepoy was a pure mercenary. He joined the army partly because of his caste traditions and partly because the Indian armies, which had provided him with his living in the past, has ceased to exist and the company offered him regular pay and pension, and a perfection to which he was accustomed. Victories of the company's Army gave him a feeling of self-importance and in the early days he was treated on terms of equality which tended to evoke sense of personal loyalty and camaraderie. With changes in the system the situation changed for the worse and estrangement grew between the Europeans and the India.

The pride of the Indians was wounded. Royal families were humiliated. The nobility was divested of influence. The people lay prostrate before the might of the foreigner. The ancient sets of power were in ruins, the ancient ways and manners all in eclipse. New men of another race, when in religion, language, culture, lorded over the sons of the soil and heaped contempt upon them, is it surprising that both the civilian and the soldiers were exasperated and ready to take up arms against the foreign ruler? The time was ripe for rebellion.

Foreign rule by its very nature is repugnant to a conquered people. The British were aware of it. Sir John Shore had realised it, when he wrote, "whatever may be the benefit of the British system of government, the evil of foreign domination counter balances all this benefits. Macaulay had said, "The heaviest of all yokes was the yoke of the stronger." The government of the people by

itself has a meaning and a reality, but such a thing as government by one people over another does not exist. One people may keep another as a preserve for its own use, a place to make money in a human cattle farm, to work for the profit of its inhabitants, but if the good of the governed is the proper business of a government, it is utterly impossible that a people should directly attend to it.

Eminent political philosopher Wendell Phillips has aptly said, "Revolutions are not made. They come, yes they come; when time is ripe, it comes." So the causes of revolution of 1857 were numerous and requires a detailed study. But the synopsis is given below.

By the time Delhousie relinquished the reins of office, the British dominion in India had reached its natural limits. From the west to the east, it extended from Indus to Irrawaddy, and from the north to the south and from the Himalays to the Indian ocean. Over these vast conquered territories the British imperial genius built up a system of government which served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it ended the anarchy which prevailed in the country in the eighteenth century, established peace and security of life and property, and created conditions for the political unification of the Indian people. On the other hand, the British secured for themselves an empire unequalled in extent, wealth and resources which gave their small island kingdom of Britain, the hegemony of the world. The adventure which had commenced in the sixteenth century, under the mercantile forces for the achievement of wealth and power, had at last culminated in success unparalleled in history.

This extraordinary phenomenon had three phases. In its first phase, the East India Company's activities were confined to trade; in

the second phase, the company entered into armed conflict with its European rivals, established its trade monopoly and acquired political influence. In the third phase, which began with the battle of Plassey, the company combined commerce with conquest and in both achieved success beyond its dreams.

The character of the upheaval according to the British historians, the out break of 1857 was a mutiny. The fashion, in fact was originally set by the government of the day for the then Secretary of state for India, Earl Stanley while reporting the events of 1857 to the parliament used the term *mutiny*. Most English writers on the subject followed his lead. Thus it was that Charles Ball, G.W. Forest, T.R. Holmes, M Innes, J.W. Kaye, G.F. Macmunin, G.T.. Malleon, C.T. Metcalfa, Earl Roberts and other used the term 'mutiny' to describe the upheaval.

Bahadur Shah, in the manifesto which was issued on 25th August says, "It is well known to all, that in this age of the people of Hindustan, both Hindus and Muhammedans are being ruined under the tyranny and oppresion of the infidel and trecherous English" and then he goes in to explain the five main heads of accusations as follows (i) concerning zamindars (ii) concerning merchants (iii) concerning public servants (iv) concerning artisans and concerning pandits, maulavis and other learned persons.

He asserted "the Pandits and Maulavis are the guardians of the Hindus and Muhammedan religions respectively and Europeans are the enemies of both and therefore, they are bound to take their share in the holy war."

The proclamation draws attention to the political and economic evils of the British rule and shows that the sufferings of the upper classes - Land lords, higher grades of merchants, civil and

military officials and Hindu and Muslim learned men were the main cause of the Revolt.

Nana Sahibe addressed letters to the emperor of France which corroborates the charges enumerated by Bahadur Shah. Among the inequities of the English Government, he mentions, "the annexation of the Maratha Dominica by falsehood and deceit, the discontinuance of the pension promised to Baji Rao II and his heirs, the overthrow of the Indian Rulers by stratagem and political machinations; the establishment of courts which ruined propertied men by the heavy expenses of litigation and the promulgation of laws contrary to their sacred codes and offensive to their religious sentiments, the levy of heavy taxes on the proprietors of land and custom duties on the products of their fields, the arbitrary proceedings by which more than 200 princes became victims of their manoeuvres, the violation of treaties and promises made to the Raja of Nagpur, the plunder of his palace and the sale of previous articles by auctions, the ignominy heaped upon the emperor of Delhi and the ruling chiefs of the Deccan, and Sind, the dethroning of Dalip Singh, the minor successor of Maharja Ranjit Singh, the deposition of the king of Oudh in violation of the treaties and engagements, the dishonouring of women and the destruction of temples and mosques, the interference with the Hindu custom of adoption of sati, the resumption of endowments made for the support of temples and charitable establishments, and above all the plan to corrupt the religious rites and customs of the Indians, so that the sepoy's cried out with one voice; it is through us that the English have conquered all the countries in Hindustan, for what have their soldiers done?"

Is it in order to lose our religion and our rites that we sacrificed our lives and our existance ?

We shall continue to fight till our strength is totally exhausted and so long as a single individual remains, alive, Nana Sahib sum up the tale in one sentence. The act of injustice and perjury of the English Government blaze in all sides like the rays of sun.

Situation of Jhansi

Bundelkhand had been a part of Maratha dominion. It included Jhansi and Bunda, both under Maratha princes. Ganyadhar Rao of Jhansi died without an heir, and Delhousie in contravention of the treaty of 1817 annexed the principality. The widowed Rani, Laksmi Bai, remonstrated without effort. Feelings were further embittered when the grants to the temples were stopped. Frustration led to a desperation. On June 4, the sepoys incited by Laxman Rao, a Brahmin in the service of the Rani Begam to hurl defiance at their officers and committed violence and murder. The Rani was proclaimed the head of the state. She provided a spirited lead to the rebels and fought heroically against the British forces, meeting her death at battle field.

The Nawab of Bunda a scion of the Peshwas and house threw his lot with the revolutionaries and lost his estate.

It spread like a wild fire in Uttar Pradesh (then known as the North-Western provinces) and Oudh. The spirit of rebellion was most fierce. This was the homeland of the sepoys, the region which constituted the heart of the Mughal empire.

Here were the holy places of the Hindus and their famous centres of ancient and medieval culture - Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Mathura, Ayodhya, Prayag and Banaras.

MEERUT - The out break in Meerut on May 10, 1857, was the signal for a general uprising all over the province. It also spread to

Kanpur, Banaras, Oudh and Lucknow, Pang, Sind and Rajastan. It also spread to central Indian provinces like, Bihar, Chotnagpur and Rajputana then spread to Maharashtra and there were rising in Hyderabad, Madras, Assam and Orissa.

The Orissa condition were different. After its annexation by British in 1803, two third of the Oriya zamindars were completely wiped out and repeated by Bengali Zamindar. The Minister of Mukunda Deva III of Khurda was the first Oriya patriot. "Jayee Rajguru was the first Oriya patriot and became martyr in 1805. Just before the decades of Sepoy mutiny, in Orissa Buxi Jagabandhu Vidyadhar of Khurda had started a rebellion in 1817. For decades, Orissa has been in turmoil as the chiefs of Goomsar, Baud and Angul defied the suzerainty of the British. The Khords, an aboriginal tribe, who inhabited the region were another aggrieved factor.

In the year 1857, the dissatisfied elements joined hands and trouble began. The princes of Sambalpur, Surendra Sahi and Uggal Sahi, who had been held as prisoners in the Hazaribagh Jail, were rescued by the rebel, took the lead. The flag of rebellion was hoisted and the authority of the British challenged. The whole country in the neighbourhood of Sambalpur passed temporarily into herds of the insurgents and it was not till 1862 that Surendra Sahi surrendered and was deported. Even then the land lords petitioned the government to restore him to gaddi.

In the Zamindaris of Parlakhemudi, the savars and other aboriginal tribes of Ganjam led by Radhakrushna Dandasana rose in rebellion.

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