

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Sepoy Uprising of India

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By the middle of the 19th century, European arms had subjugated a large portion of Asia and Africa. Pax Britannica ruled the oceans and the Indian Ocean had become a British lake. The Dutch and the French tagged along and made inroads into some of the littoral states like Indonesia and Vietnam. Japan held on, but the subversion of China through opium and hard drugs was in full swing. The West African slave trade had ended, leaving Africa exhausted and depleted of its manpower. Asia was in deep slumber and international trade was firmly in the hands of European companies.

India was the first great Asian civilization to fall to the European onslaught. The British made their first attempt to get a foothold in the subcontinent in 1686 during the reign of the Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb. Directed by Sir Josiah Child, the governor of the East India Company, a British fleet made an attempt to capture the harbor of Chittagong. The response of the Emperor was swift. The British were driven out and had to give up all their fortifications in Bengal. Similarly, on the west coast, they incurred the wrath of the Emperor when they engaged in piracy directed against the pilgrims to Mecca. They were expelled from Surat but were later allowed to return after paying a substantial fine.

However, the fortunes of India turned as the Moghul Empire disintegrated in the 18th century. Bengal fell at the Battle of Plassey (1757). Tippu Sultan waged a valiant struggle to contain and expel the British from India but he fell at the Battle of Srirangapatam (1799). The Marathas in Poona sued for peace in 1803. In 1806 British armies were camped near Red Fort in Delhi. The Sikhs in the Punjab held out a little longer, but by 1850, they too succumbed to the force of British arms and the subcontinent, save for the tribal areas of the Northwest Frontier, was in British hands.

It would seem astonishing that a great and prosperous landmass like India would fall with such ease to a handful of merchants from the British Isles. We have covered in some detail the march of global events that contributed to the rise of England. India imploded due to its own weight. The tensions introduced by power struggles between the princes, the absence of a national consciousness, lack of accurate information and intelligence about the global forces at work, neglect of naval technology and a general decay in the ethical standards of the ruling classes were all contributing factors. The British took advantage of these implosive forces and with an astonishingly small investment in men and material, made themselves masters of a great empire.

The rapacity of the British East India Company did not go unnoticed. During the hundred years since the fall of Bengal (1757), Company rule had reduced much of India into abject poverty. During the Moghul period, Bengal was the richest province of India and one of the richest in Asia. Blessed with the fertile delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, it produced a surplus of food. Its manufactured goods included fine muslin cloth, brass work and sugar. Its cotton goods were in high demand the world over. Within eight years of its conquest by Robert Clive, Bengal was on its knees and what was once one of the richest provinces in Asia became one of the poorest. The accumulated capital in the possession of the Nawab of Bengal was looted and more than three million pounds were taken out of Calcutta. The manufacturing base was debilitated through heavy taxation and the market was flooded with cheap goods from England. The successors of Robert Clive were even more ruthless in their exploitation. Warren Hastings, the Governor General who succeeded Robert Clive, starved the begums (queens) of Oudh to extract from them their collection of jewels (1765). When Srirangapatam fell, the state treasury of Tippu was looted and a sum of over two million rupees fell into British hands. The golden throne of Tippu was broken up, melted down and distributed among the conquering British troops. Similar episodes were repeated in the kingdoms where the Company managers, exploiting internal rivalries for succession, extracted large sums from the rajas and the nawabs. Surplus capital disappeared from India. The taxation imposed by the Company ensured that additional capital growth in native hands would be impossible. The Company's objective was profit and its relentless pursuit made the Company managers oblivious of the welfare of the general population.

The rise of Company rule had two concurrent effects. The martial races in India, the Pathans, Rajputs, Afghans and the Marathas lost their power. Indeed, in many cases the Company troops went after the Indian warriors with a vengeance, as they did against the Afghan Rohillas in the Gangetic Plains (1765). As the warriors lost their power and faced impoverishment, the moneylenders spread their tentacles. In Bengal, for instance, the double blows British taxation and exploitative usury by Indian moneylenders devastated the peasant and merchant alike. Resentment against the British grew.

A second element in this growing resentment was the takeover of some of the native states by the Company in total disregard of treaty obligations. During its relentless military advance on Indian soil, the Company had entered into a series of treaties with a host of native princes as its "allies". By 1850, the British stranglehold on India was so secure that they no longer needed these "allies" and the takeover of the native kingdoms began in utter disregard of legalities or treaty obligations. The motivation was greed and increased revenues for the Company. A variety of excuses were invented for such takeovers. One was the doctrine of "lapse" under which a kingdom could be taken over if a prince had no male heir. Another was the doctrine of "paramountcy" which was a catchall for supposed mismanagement by a local prince. During the tenure of Dalhousie as Governor General (1848-1856), the takeover of Indian territories was pursued with relentless vigor. First to fall was the kingdom of Satara (1848), once ruled by the mighty Peshwas. This was followed by the Rajput principalities of Jaipur, Udaipur and Jhansi, the Maratha stronghold of Nagpur, the kingdom of Sambalpur in Bengal and Baghat in the Punjab. Each takeover netted the British considerable cash from the native treasuries and ensured recurrent revenues from the land.

The annexation that tipped the scale in favor of an uprising was that of the large and prosperous kingdom of Oudh, which occupied the central plains of the Ganges River. In total disregard of a treaty made more than a half a century earlier, Company troops marched from Kanpur and forced the Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah to give up his kingdom. Wajid Ali did not resist. Believing in his legal rights and in the rule of law, he appealed first to the British Commissioner James Outram and then to the Governor General Dalhousie. Both turned a deaf ear to his protestations. Wajid Ali then took his case to London where his presentation received an equally cold shoulder. Wajid Ali, a prince schooled in the old

paradigm of honor and contractual obligations, did not understand the paradigm of a merchant. To the East India Company, a treaty was only a piece of paper, to fall back on when it suited their self interest but to be torn up if it was to their advantage. Wajid Ali returned to India a bitter man and resolved to take up arms against the wily "*Firangis*" (from the word Frank, meaning a European).

A third element in the Uprising was the heavy-handed Company approach to taxation and revenue increase. Brushing aside treaty obligations, Dalhousie reduced or eliminated the hefty pensions of the Indian potentates who had served British interests in the past. Chief among them was the Nawab of Arcot and the Peshwa of Poona (1853). The adopted son of the Peshwa, Nana Sahib, became a leader of the incipient Sepoy Uprising. The process of land confiscation was not confined to the displacement of princes of blood but extended to secondary and tertiary levels as well. During the Moghul Raj (rule) and in the interregnum following its dismemberment, large *jagirs* had been conferred upon faithful courtiers. In turn, the local potentates had appointed talukdars to collect taxes and pass on the revenue to the higher authorities. The jagirs and taluks were held in perpetuity, from father to son and served as fiefdoms, which served as pillars of stability for the pleasure-loving rajas and nawabs. The Company abolished some of these jagirs and removed the talukdars so that the revenue from their properties accrued directly to the coffers of the Company. This bred resentment and when the spark of the Uprising was lit, some of the jagirdars and talukdars served as local focuses of revolt. In 1858, the British, realizing the importance of retaining the loyalty of the jagirdars and talukdars, reinstated many of the jagirs and hereditary taluks in northern India, thus creating a multi-layered hierarchy of local princes, jagirdars and talukdars whose loyalty to the British crown could be counted upon in times of trouble.

Perhaps the most important factor in the Great Indian Uprising was the injured religious sensibility of the Sepoys. Medieval India was a land of religion. The East India Company had entered the subcontinent as a venture for profit. Unlike the Portuguese and the Spaniards who considered their military adventures a part of religious crusades, the British did not even allow evangelists to board their merchant ships. However, as British rule was consolidated, this picture gradually changed. The conquest of vast territories in Asia and Africa produced a sociology of dominance by Europeans. A feeling of superiority took root. A belief started to take hold that European religion and institutions were somehow superior to those of the "natives". The Indians were not unaware of these attitudes. The growing resentment against the foreigners only needed a spark to explode.

The spark was lit in 1856, when the Company introduced the new Enfield rifle. The Enfield represented a considerable advance in design from prior models and offered the advantage of rapid firing. But the design was not "user friendly". It was not sensitive to the religious feelings of its user, namely the Indian Sepoy. The paper wrapper of its cartridge was coated with lard and cow fat and a user was required to bite off the paper before he inserted the cartridge into the rifle. To a Muslim, the pig is an unclean animal, which he is forbidden to eat. To a Hindu, the cow is a sacred animal, which he is required to protect. The Indians felt that the new rifles were deliberately designed to defile the religion of Muslims and Hindus alike. It was seen as an attempt by the unbelieving foreigners to convert them to Christianity, which has no injunctions against the meat of the pig or the fat of the cow.

On May 7, 1857, on a hot, dusty parade ground in Meerat, a regiment of Indian Sepoys refused to accept the Enfield rifle as British artillery ringed them from all sides. The Sepoys were chained and led to the dungeons for "disobeying" orders. The following day Meerat exploded. The Sepoys rose up, quickly overpowered the British garrison and marched towards Delhi. The Delhi garrison joined the uprising and within three days, Delhi was back in Indian hands. The Moghul flag flew over the Red Fort and Bahadur Shah was reinstated as the Emperor of Hindustan. Encouraged by this success, the Sepoys in Lucknow, Kanpur, Gwalior and Jhansi joined the Uprising. By the end of July, the British had lost

control of the Gangetic Plains, extending from Meerat to Benares and of the central highlands. A Royal Proclamation from Delhi went forth to the cities of northern India and Pathans, Rajputs and Marathas alike joined the struggle.

The uprising did not succeed. To the Sikhs in the Punjab, who had fought the Great Moghuls in the previous century, a reinstatement of Moghul rule was unacceptable. The British Major Nicholson marched back to Delhi at the head of a Sikh regiment in September 1857. The Nizam of Hyderabad and some of the Rajput princes remained loyal to the British and sent contingents to help them. Coordination between the principal seats of the Great Uprising was minimal. The Emperor, an old man of seventy, was more interested in Urdu poetry than in the arts of war. He made no attempt to weld the various garrisons into a national force. The British, on the other hand, were determined and well led by experienced officers. The newly installed telegraph lines proved to be a boon to the besieged British garrisons between Lahore and Calcutta. The British, in addition, had the advantage of artillery and rapid firing guns and could call upon additional reinforcements by sea from as far away as South Africa and the Straits of Malacca. Nonetheless, it is a tribute to the tenacity of the Indians, that leaders like the Rani (queen) of Jhansi, Tantia Topi of the Marathas, General Bakht Khan of Delhi, Maulana Ahmadullah and Maulvi Ahmadullah of Faizabad continued their struggle well into the summer of 1858. The last mentioned was perhaps the most determined of the resistance fighters. Paying tribute to Maulvi Ahmadullah, Holmes, in his "History of the Indian Mutiny" wrote, "The Maulvi . . . was a man fitted both by his spirit and his capacity to support a great cause and to command a great army . . . He was a true patriot . . . He had fought manfully, honorably and stubbornly in the field against the strangers who had seized his country and his memory is entitled to the respect of the brave and the true-hearted of all nations". The Rani of Jhansi died on the battlefield and Tantia Topi was caught by the British and hung like the other leaders of the Uprising.

The aftermath of the Uprising was gruesome for India and a disaster for the Muslims in northern India. Seeking vengeance, the victorious British showed no mercy to the vanquished. The entire population of Delhi was banished from that ancient city. The magnificent Moghul palaces in the Red Fort were demolished and in its place barracks were erected for the British cavalry. The vast area between the Red Fort and Jamia Masjid, wherein stood many a nobleman's home and an ancient mosque, was razed to the ground. Every house in the old city was broken into and looted. Thirty-three of the Moghul princes were butchered and the Moghul lineage came to an end. Week after week, the streets and bazaars of Old Delhi were witness to mass hangings. Historians disagree on the number of people killed in the uprising. In a recent book, *In the War of Civilizations: India AD 1857*, Amresh Misra estimates the number killed at over one million. Emperor Bahadur Shah himself was tried, like a common criminal and was finally banished to Rangoon in Burma, to die a forlorn man.

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