

# **THE REVOLT OF 1857 (PART-1)**

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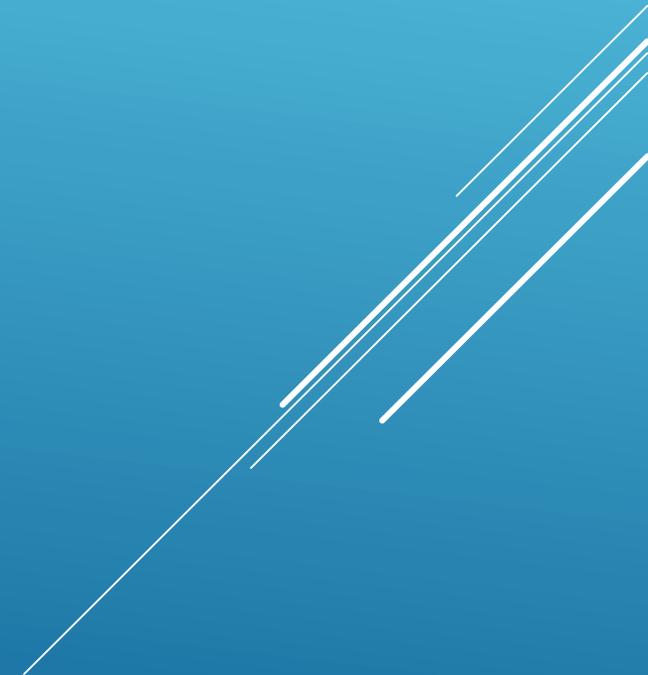
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# THE REVOLT OF 1857

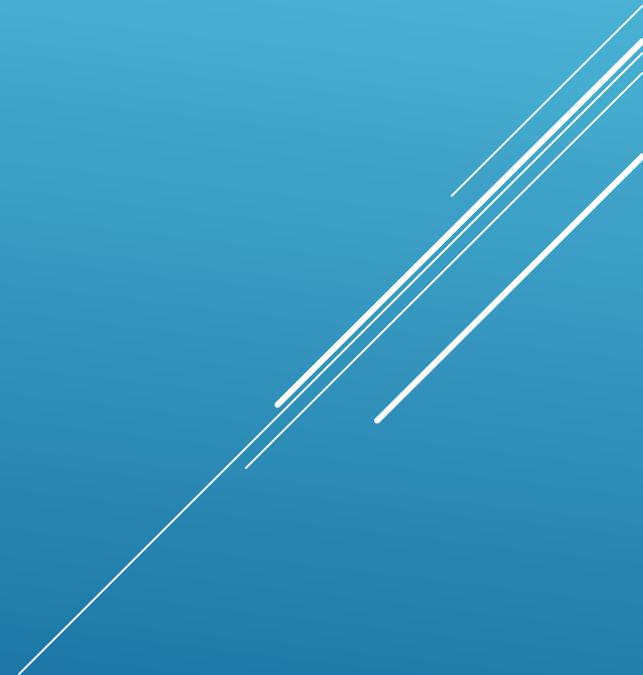
The revolt of 1857 forms one of the most important chapters in the history of the struggle of the Indian people for liberation from the British rule. It shook the foundations of the British Empire in India and at some points it seemed as though the British rule would end for all time to come. What started 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 REVOLT OF 1857

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 it alone that I have learnt our race is not even feared at times by many and that by all it is disliked.*



# CAUSES

The main reason for this revolt was the ruthless exploitation of 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 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.

# CAUSES

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.



# CAUSES

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.

# CAUSES

## ► **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 recognize the hereditary rights of the peasants on land, which they had earlier enjoyed.

# CAUSES

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

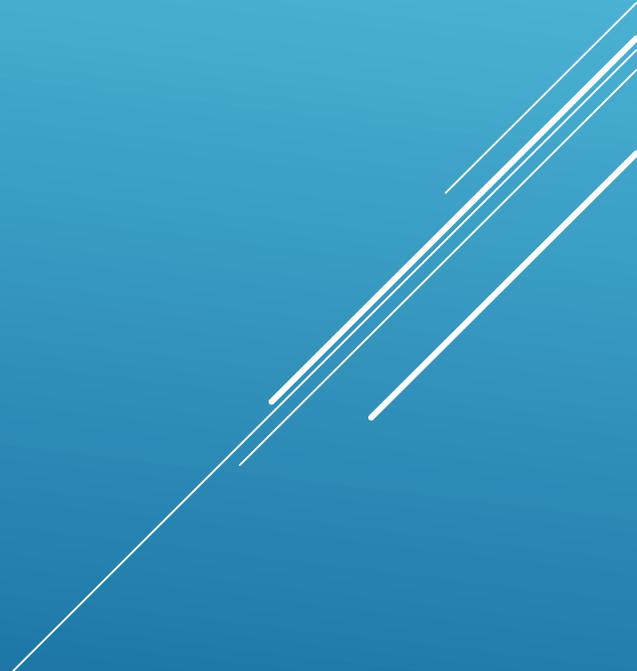
# CAUSES

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 droughts or flood compelled them to go for 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.



# CAUSES

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 courts and money lenders created a vicious circle which made the peasantry desperate and ready to welcome any opportunity for change of regime.



# CAUSES

## ► 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.

# CAUSES

The Indians now served only as subordinates and on other petty positions in the administration. Even the most brilliant of Indians were subordinated to the second or third-rate Britishers who as a matter of right, grabbed all the higher paid positions. Furthermore, the cultural personnel like poets, dramatists, writers, musicians etc. who were earlier employed by the native states were now thrown out. The religious men like Pandits and Maulvis also lost all their former power and prestige.

(To be continued)

