

THE GREAT WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

THE REAL FACTS

Ahmed Hussain Shah Bukhari *

Ghulam Mustafa Gaho**

Ghulam Akbar Mahesar***

Abstract:

This research paper intends to highlight the true picture of the causes, events and failure of the great war of Independence which changed the conditions of the Muslims in sub-continent and left a challenge for the Muslims to overcome all the problems and to cope with the dominant Hindus and the British Rulers., eventually the war brought internal changes and re-organization of the British Administration. To the British it was a mutiny, for some it was a rebellion but for the Muslims of the sub-continent it was a war for their independence.

Keywords: War of Independence, Causes, Failure, Revolt, Independence.

Introduction

It was during the mid of the 19th century when the Indian Subcontinent saw a great uprising against the dominant British rulers who denied the rights to the real inhabitants of this great region.

People of India responded to British rule in many ways. One way was the armed opposition. India saw frequent local uprisings, some by land owners protesting land revenue assessments, others by nomads trying to drive out the peasants who were encroaching on their lands. Occasionally, The East India Company's Indian troops mutinied; in 1806, soldiers at Vellore in Tamil Nadu rebelled apparently because they felt that the British were infringing on the practice of their religion. In 1857, the Great War broke out. It began with mutinying in the Bengal Army. Basically recent, company policy was to deny the foreign services allowance when they were stationed

To examine the true nature and character of the uprising of 1857, the various aspects of this event needs a careful investigation. Was it a Rebellion or a War of Independence? Was it just sepoy revolt against their higher ranks or a general popular uprising against the foreign rulers of the subcontinent? Was it preplanned or an organized movement or just unprompted reactions of the sepoys to the ill counseled and unwise policies of the military headship of the East India Company? Was there a foreign hand involved in the uprising or was it purely native? (*World Times 2014*) All these questions need to be answered..

To the British, it was a mutiny, the event was branded as mutiny against the legitimate government as the Secretary of State Earl Stanley said to the British Parliament, Later many British writers followed the trend by naming it a mutiny against a lawful constituted authority (Ibid: 98)

Causes of Failure

Since the battle of Plassey, the territorial power of the company had been growing very fast and the Indian states began to feel the burden of it. By 1818, when the last Peshwa was ousted, almost all the Indian states had either been seized or had entered in a treaty with the company on humiliating conditions (www.bankofinfo.com)

There were political, economic, social, religious and military reasons which were boiling underneath for some time. But the outburst was as such sudden as it started without prior planning and co-ordination. It was not so easy to challenge English rulers who had in their control sufficiently a wide area of the sub-continent and had better knowledge of modern techniques of warfare. (Rafiullah, 1989: 65)

British policy towards Muslims was the policy of suppression because they thought that the Muslims of the sub-continent were a great threat to their Policy of Imperialism. The Britishers feared that the Muslims would try to revive their rule in the sub-continent so they suppressed them as they could not rise again. On the other hand they gave favors to the Hindus, which they accepted as the condition was not much different from that in which they lived for centuries. There was only change in the masters.

As W.W.Hunter quotes from Durban “The Mohammadans have sunk so low that, even when qualified for government services they are studiously kept out of it by government notifications. Nobody takes notice of their helpless condition and higher authorities do not deign even to acknowledge their existence”. (Mahmood, 1990: 02)

Political Causes

Expansion Policy

Annexation by War

In 1843, the Britishers attacked Sindh and it was added to their dominion; it was an act of violence to cover the dreadful disaster which the British army had suffered in the Afghan War.

The revolt of Diwan Mulraj of Multan was used as ploy for the occupation of the Punjab in 1849, Dilip Singh the Maharaja was given pension and Punjab was put under a Board of three commissioners.

Annexation by Doctrine of Lapse

It means that in the absence of natural heirs to the throne, the dependent states were to lapse to the paramount power, that was to the company. Heirless Hindu rulers used to adopt sons who would succeed them to throne.

It also did not acknowledge the right of those states to adopt heirs which had been a long standing practice among the Hindus, without the consent of the ruling authority. It was enunciated by the board of directors some years ago, Dalhousie was not the originator of doctrine.

The Doctrine had two main objectives:

- (a) Welfare of the subjects of the dependant states.
- (b) Imperialistic consideration.

Lord Dalhousie refused to recognize this system and annexed their states to the British Empire.

Application of Doctrine

The Principality of Satra was the first to fall a victim to the Doctrine of Lapse. The Raja of Satra died without any heir and before his death he adopted a son without the consent of the British Govt. Lord Dalhousie declared the adoption illegal and annexed the Satra to the British Empire.

Annexation on Ground of Misgovernment

In 1856, Oudh was annexed on the pretext of misgovernment; Wajid Ali the last ruler of Oudh was deported to Calcutta and allowed a pension of twelve lacs per year.

Imperial Title was to be Discontinued

“Dalhousie’s policy inflamed the Muslims. After losing all territories and power the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was receiving pension from the British and his authority was confined only to Red Fort of Delhi” (Sarwar, 2005: 46). After the death of Bahadur Shah Zafar his son would not be called the Emperor-King.

Economic Causes

Commercial Policy

All the ports of the subcontinent were declared free ports. Gold was taken away; silver had to be adopted as currency.

Confiscation of Lands

Many landlords were deprived of their lands as they failed to establish their proprietary rights by documented proof. Investigations were even made into the titles of those who had estates for many generations before the arrival of the company’s rule.

Rent Free Lands

Enquiries were held in regard to rent free properties. Many failed to satisfy the authorities in regard to the original validity of their titles and their holding were resumed to make larger income for the government.

The complaints of land holding classes were further increased by the new sale law and undue taxation which ruined the landlords and peasant alike. Unlike the previous system land was inalienable but now it could be sold in difference for payment of rent.

Revenue was not spent here but was taken away to Britain, People who were unable to produce documents of land, land was taken away. Jagirs (Property) were taken away and

the farmers were not happy.

Unemployment

The Britishers had dual policy, The Indians were denied high posts and the Britishers from Britain were given all governmental jobs.

That was heavy burden on India because on one hand there was unemployment for the natives and the money earned by the Britishers serving in the government was sent to Britain.

That was heavy burden on India because on the one hand there was unemployment of native people on the other hand the high amounts were sent to Britain by foreign employees in the shape of salaries.

Destruction of Local Industries

The Indian cottage industries suffered heavily due to the competition of machine made goods. While Indian handicrafts and industries were destroyed, Indian agriculture was encouraged.

The most of raw materials which were produced in India were sent to England to feed the industries in Britain. That policy made India to dependant on England.

The Government Industry in Dacca, which produced the silk of highest quality, was also destroyed.

Religious and Social Causes

In the 19th century the British began to interfere with the social and the religious practices of the people. Abolition of Sati and the introduction of widow re-marriage were not welcomed by mass of the people.

Attempts were made to convert Muslims and Hindus into Christianity. It was the policy of the government the people of the sub-continent, other than the Britishers were converted into Christianity. Board of Directors declared that the God had given them power to convert all into Christianity. In the 19th Century missionaries were to be sent and seen everywhere. They mocked in public the tenants of Islam and Hinduism.

The teachings of Bible were introduced in government schools and orphans of catastrophes were made to convert into Christianity. In 1837 there was a famine in which many unclaimed babies were found and those babies were converted into Christianity. In 1850 Lord Canning passed two acts. Law said that those who were converted to religion other than Christianity would not inherit their property (Ibid: 336).

Military Causes

Differences of Salaries

The soldiers of Bengal Army were mostly from Oudh and North West Province. They had fought with unflinching devotion in the most difficult circumstances but they did not get fair deal. Their salaries were very low in comparison with those of the British soldiers and

chances of their promotion were negligible.

Deprivation of Certain Privileges

They had also grievances regarding the payment of extra allowances for serving in newly conquered territories like Sind, which were foreign lands to them.

Act was passed to serve in foreign lands:

Soldiers had an aversion to serve in foreign lands and travelling across the seas was meaning loss of their caste but in the year 1856 an order was passed by Lord Canning that all new recruits for the Bengal Army should be obliged to swear to fight in any part of the World

The Greased Cartridges:

In January 1857 a rumor went round at Calcutta that the new cartridges to be used in the Enfield rifle were greased with the fat of cows and pigs and that this has been done to defile both, the Hindus and the Muslims soldiers who would use the cartridges. The news soon spread to all the military stations. This provoked a storm of resentment and sparked the embers of dissatisfaction. The cartridges hurried the revolt which had long been developing.

On 26th February 1857, the 19th Native infantry at Behrampur refused to use cartridges and it marched towards Barrackpur to be disbanded under the eyes of a British regiment specially brought back from Burma. On 29th March, 1857 Mangal Pande, a young officer of the 34th Native infantry, fired at his British officers and called his comrades but they did not join him he was caught and hanged. He was the first Indian who sacrificed his life in this war. The second person who was killed in this war was Ishwari Pande. On 23rd April 1857, the commanding officer of the 3rd light cavalry ordered 89 men to accept the cartridges, among them 4 accepted and 85 refused to accept it. During the 8-9th May all 85 were court marshaled and sent to jail for 10 years imprisonment.

It started on May 10th. The excited cavalry men attacked the jail where 85 persons were imprisoned, all of them were set free. There was general revolt and the city of Delhi passed into the hands of the rebels. Eventually they placed Bahadur Shah Zafar on throne. Mirza Mughal, the son of Bahadur Shah was the commander of armed forces.

Rani of Jhansi was capable woman who fought bravely and died fighting the Britishers. General Bakhat Khan was a brilliant man but was not the main show but it was the galaxy of the outstanding generals like Lawrence, Outram, Nicholson and Edward who fought with devotion and loyalty to the Queen.

The British Commander in Chief General Anson was determined to maintain discipline. 'I'll never give in to their beastly prejudice', he declared. Eighty five of the sepoys were given long prison sentences of ten years hard labor on the roads. By setting such a harsh example, the British intended to remind everyone that they were firmly in charge. Just a day after the sentences had been handed out their fellow sepoys mutinied, murdered their officers, freed the prisoners, and marched towards Delhi where they joined together with other Indian

soldiers. They massacred all the British they could find. Suddenly, British rule in that part of India was under threat. (Smith: 34)

Causes of the Failure:

- Absence of organized plan
- Absence of Unity and purpose
- Jealousy
- Superior war equipment of British
- Control over communication
- Control over ports
- Many states remained loyal to British
- Lack of popular support
- Lack of capable leadership

Treating the Rebels:

The ferocity and massacre on both sides in 1857 was dreadful, resulting in terrible meanness on both sides. A variety of methods were used to kill prisoners:

- Hanging
- Shooting
- Burned alive
- Muslims were sewn into pigskins and hanged (Smith : 36)

The Viceroy Lord Canning adopted a policy of conciliation and the East India Company was abolished and the British Crown governed India directly. (Kazimi: 2007: 50)

Result of the Uprising:

One of the results was the end of the East India Company. The British Government now took on full responsibility for governing India. But relations between the Indians and the British had worsened. An even deeper gulf than ever before existed between them, and was never bridged. Muslims responded to the harsh treatment against them by simply refusing to cooperate with the British. The long-term presence of the British in their country was never going to be accepted by the overwhelming majority of the Indians. It was only a matter of time before others, using different methods, would seek to gain control over their own country. (Smith: 2014: 37)

Affect of the Rebellions to the British:

The uprising gave the British a serious shock: they had not expected it. It also cost them a great deal of money. Restoring their grip on the country cost at least 30 Million pounds. Trade and business was seriously disrupted for more than a year. No longer could the British authorities take the loyalty of the Indians for granted. In Britain, a small but growing number of people began to question whether or not they had any right to govern India. (Smith: 2014: 37)

After the 1857 the British administration and sub-continent was re-organized. The East India Company was abolished and the Indian Administration came directly under the Crown of England. Queen Victoria was proclaimed as Empress of India and the Governor General was given the title of the Viceroy of India that is the personal representative of the British Crown in India.

The British believed that the Muslims were entirely responsible for the revolution of 1857 and hence were subjected to ruthless punishment. All doors of employment were closed to them. Their education was hindered. The court language Persian was replaced by English. New English law replaced the old Muslim Law. Though the Muslims had lost their temporal power and with it practically everything, still they were trying to rejuvenate themselves in the existing conditions.

(Karim1984: 64)

What do Historians say about 1857?

‘If it had been a war of Independence, the whole country would have risen with the civilian population joining in as well’

Norman Lowe, *Modern British History*, Macmillan (1984)

‘People made a great sacrifice and waged a heroic struggle to end foreign domination’

J. Hussain, *A History of the Peoples of Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, (1997)

‘I think it can be described as a last convulsive movement of protest against the coming of the west’

Percival Spear, *A History of India*, Penguin (1956)

‘The Mutiny unreasonably disastrous hardened British feeling against the Muslims’

Richard Symonds, *The Making of Pakistan*, Faber & Faber (1950)

‘The Indians had tried to overthrow the foreign yoke, but they had failedheavy punishment put a fear of the British in the people’s heart’

S.F.Mahmud, *A Concise History of Indo-Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, (1988)

‘Though the upheaval of 1857 failed to drive the British out of India, it succeeded in the limited purpose of making them acknowledge what had gone wrong and made them promise to behave more considerately in the future’

S.M.Burke & Salim Al-Din Quraishi, *The British Raj in India*, Oxford University Press (1995)

Discussion Conclusion:

Many authors and writers have mentioned greased cartridges being the immediate cause of the war of Independence but it was the lava of the multiple causes boiling underneath the subcontinent that sparked the war. There were accumulated wrongs of the decades and the atrocities done by the British towards the people of the subcontinent. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan describes this as a revolt because of the attitude of the British Government towards the local people and describes Government and people as two different stones one having black color and the other having white. Eventually the ultimate reaction by the British was very harsh to the Muslim community but the Hindus were able to take a safe

corner since they were working with the British. The Britishers called it a mutiny towards a legitimate government while the people of the subcontinent declared it a war against the tyrannical and cruel colonial power of the Britishers. Hence they called it the War of Independence

References:

- Jehangir, 2014, *World Times*, Vol: 7 Issue XI August, P: 95.
- Ibid:98
- Kazimi M.R, 2007, *Pakistan Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, P : 50
- Karim Arshad Syed, 1984, *Pakistan: From Community to Nation*, Saad Publications, P: 64
- Mahmood Safdar, 1990, *Pakistan Political Roots and Development*, Vanguard Books (Pvt.) Ltd, P: 2
- www.bankofinfo.com/resistance-to-the-british-in-bengal-and-the-effectiveness-and-consequences-of-such-opposition/ Accessed on 05/09/2014
- Shehab Rafiullah, 1989, *History of Pakistan*, Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan : Sang-e-Meel, P : 65
- Sarwar Gul Shahzad 2005, *Pakistan Studies*, Sixteenth Edition, Karachi: Rehbar Publishers p. 46
- Ibid: 336.
- Smith Nigel, 2014, *Pakistan: History, Culture and Government*, Ninth Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 36

Mega Lecture