

Causes of War of Independence

There were many causes of the War of Independence of 1857. They can be divided into political, religious, military, economic and social causes. The East India Company was aiming to annex all the states of India like Avadh, Tanjore, Jhansi, Satara, etc. That's why they introduced systems like Doctrine of Lapse by which Indian states could be taken over by the Company in case there was no male heir to the throne of the state. This provoked the rulers like Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Peshwa and Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi. The Company also declared that after the death of the then Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, his family had to move out of the Red Fort and his successors were also forbidden to use the title of emperor. All these attempts alienated both Hindu and Muslim Indians who realized that the White men were intending to devour their lands.

The people of India at that time were highly concerned about their religion and religious rites. For them the most sacred thing was their faith. But when they realized that the Company was promoting Christianity in their land they became furious. In fact the Christian missionaries all over India were being patronized by the British government and in 1855 the priests like E. Edmund professed that the whole of India should be under one religion, i.e., Christianity. Similarly the introduction of some social laws added fuel to fire. For instance, the English government banned *Satti* (Hindu practice of burning the widow along with the dead body of her husband), and allowed the widows to remarry. Such legislations badly hurt the feelings of Hindus. In the military setup they introduced some regulations that injured religious sentiments of the Indians. For example, under the military rules the Indian soldiers were forbidden to have beards or wear turbans or put *tilaks* on their foreheads. These regulations made Indians realize that their faiths were in jeopardy.

Whenever the English annexed any state of India into their domain they dismantled its army and disemployed the local soldiers. Thus after having been enslaved the second shock the local soldiers had to bear was unemployment that made them despise the foreign invader. Besides, the English invariably maintained discrimination between their soldiers and the Indian soldiers in respect of salaries and fringe benefits with the result that the disheartened soldiers made up their minds to fight against the English.

There were economic causes as well. During the rule of the Mughals, not only the Muslims but also the Hindus would be appointed on all important positions but by the English the Muslims and the Hindus both were deemed as untrustworthy and consequently all the higher posts were held by the White men. The natives were either turned jobless or appointed on lower levels of the state departments. The East India Company that was eager to amass wealth out of the trade considered India no more than a field of producing raw materials for the industries of England. The subsidiary system with additional taxes even on uncultivated lands added fuel to the fire and economically devastated the common Indians.

In addition to these reasons there was an immediate cause that coerced the Indians to go for war. In the words of Lord Canning, Lawrence and Syed Ahmed Khan it was, indeed, the most significant cause. For a new Enfield rifle introduced in the early period of 1857 the cartridges were covered with some animal fat that was supposed to be either of cow or a boar. Before using these cartridges they were to be cut by teeth. Since the cows were sacred for the Hindus and pigs were *haram* for the Muslims both of them refused to carry such rifles. But their English officers used force that offended the Hindus and Muslims alike and thus all these causes instigated the war in India to which we call the War of Independence 1857.

Impact and Achievements

British East India Company abolished: One major outcome of the war was that it brought an end to the suppressive rule of the British East India Company in 1858. If we do not consider other results only this outcome of the war was a great achievement in itself. "Sayyid Ahmad heartily welcomed the return of peace. The assumption of the company dominions by the Crown directly linked the destinies of India with those of Britain. This he considered to be the luckiest event in the history of the two countries". The Company which landed in Calicut in 1608 grew like a living organism and extended its control to most of the parts of India till 1857. Following Battle of Plassey in 1757 the Company established its administration in Bengal following that the Company never looked back and other territories like Oudh, Sind, Punjab, Delhi, Madras etc faced the same fate as Bengal. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan immediately wrote Causes of Indian Revolt in 1858 in which he criticized the Company and blamed the war on it. "With a firm sociological background it criticized the Company rule very strongly and showed that the revolt was an outcome of the frustrations and accumulated wrongs of decades". John Bright a member

parliament was very critical of the affairs of the BEIC. He was very vocal about it as well. In his speech on June 24, 1858, he framed four charges against company,

“(1) "the industry of the people of India had been grievously neglected"; ,

(2) "that there was great reason for complaint with respect to the administration of justice";

(3) "that with regard to the wars entered into by the Indian government there was much of which the people of England had reason to be ashamed";.

(4) " that there was also a general impression that the expenditure of the East Indian government was excessive; and that it had been proved before more than one committee that the taxes imposed upon the people of India were onerous to the last degree."

A detailed study of the 100 year rule of company brings out the horrors which the people of Sub-Continent faced. Other than the religious and social persecutions the people of India suffered most economically. The company which had only one concern with the Sub-continent, profit, economically suffocated the local people in all fields of life for their own benefit. After the war although economical chains were not completely shattered but there was surely relieves. Many lands which have been confiscated by the company through different law and treaties were returned to their earlier claimants. In addition to that Indians were given more opportunities in the services which brought down the level of frustration in the hearts of the people and also provided economic relieves. “The Viceroyalty of Canning (1858-1862) was also marked by the withdrawal of the Doctrine of Lapse and the foundation of three Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras”. Legal Status for the people of India: Before the war and during the rule of the Company the people of India had no status. India was recognized as an official colony of Britain in 1858. People of India were not enjoying any legal status because British East India Company was administering the country for their own goals, not for the development or welfare of local people. They did not give any representation to Indian in terms of making laws for India. After the war people of India which had no status during the rule of the company got the status of citizen in the proclamation of 1858. “There was complete reorganization of the internal administration. In fact, British were more influenced than the Indians by this epoch making event” The history suggests that for the company the people of India were just a hurdle in the path of economic profits which they tried to overcome through different laws. The laws which were passed during the company rule ignored the welfare of the people, their social fabric and religious believes. “The most important result of Mutiny was the Act for the better Government

of India 1858. This act was, in fact, the termination of a process commenced by the Pitts India Act in 1784". After the war of 1857 India witnessed a series of reforms in which Indians were given more and more rights. The proclamation of 1858 was the first of the series which almost predicted the future reforms and set the directions for them. "The Queen who had rejected the first proclamation submitted to her and requested that the revised draft, 'should breathe feelings of generosity, benevolent and religious toleration', disclaimed as the company had so often done, all desire for an extension of territory, promised to respect 'the rights, dignity, and honor of native Prince and to uphold religious toleration and declared it to be her will 'that so far as many and impartially admitted to offices in our services the duties of which may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity, duly to discharge'". The introduction of Indian Councils Act 1861 was a giant leap forward. In it for the first time Indians were included in the Legislature. The central legislature was enlarged. "This was another great achievement of the reign of Canning in India". India saw many further reforms which brought further relieve to Indian people. "The introduction of local self government was an immortal work of Lord Ripon. The chief aim behind the introduction of the local self government was to train the Indians properly in the art of government with a view to enabling them to shoulder the responsibility of the administration of India in future. Before Lord Ripon, Indians were not allowed to take part in the administration in any way". These reforms contributed towards the confidence of Indians during 1880's. It also brought an understanding of politics for the people. People like Ameer Ali came forward to become an example in front of other who on the basis of his ability became an important part of British machinery. Later many others followed his footprints and served their country. End of armed struggle and advent of Politics: British came to India in 1608 (First British ship Landed in India in 1608 in Calicut and they were refused to trade in India by Emperor Jehangir. Later they were permitted to trade in the Province of Gujarat under the governorship of Prince Khurram). Since then they played the role of traders in India until 1757 (Conquest of Bengal in battle of Plassey in which British defeated Nawab Siraj Udaula of Bengal). For next hundred years until 1857 BEIC became indulged in politics and administration of India. It was during this century long suppressive rule that many Indians across India took arms against British. For example, 1757 Bengal, 1763 Battle of Buxar in which Shuja ud Daula of Awadh, Mir Qasim of Bengal and Shah Alam II, Mughal king confronted British, 1770's Hyder Ali in Mysore, 1780's Tipu in Mysore, 1830's Ranjeet Singh in Punjab and Sindh 1843

etc. Throughout this period thousands of Indians died on both sides because the foot soldiers of BEIC were Indians. 1857 marked the end of the continuous violence and bloodshed. After the war as discussed earlier the BEIC was replaced with direct British rule. From 1857 till 1947 Indian achieved freedom and Pakistan was created no battle of the scale of previous examples was fought. Though there were some political movements which turned violent for the time being. With educational reforms introduced by British after the war a new breed of Indians emerged in the form of Jinnah, Iqbal, Nehru, Tilak, Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Hasrat Mohani, Gnadhi, Abul Kalam Azad, Shaukat Ali, etc., were capable of fighting political and constitutional battle against British. The formation of Congress in 1885 was not an insignificant event. It brought a dimension in the History of Sub-Continent. Although at the start it was working for developing better relations between the ruler and the ruled but as time passed we saw that the same Congress was able to thrust British out of their boundaries through a political movement. This political activity later compelled Muslims for the formation of Muslim League in 1906. The League as the History proved led Muslims to achieve what no other nation has been able to achieve, to get a land on the basis of ideology (Israel is another example but it was supported by the Western powers). The Congress and League brought constitutional methods for the solutions of the problems faced by Indians. The newly western educated Indians changed the face of struggle against foreign occupation in India. Now the people of India were not looking to solve their problems by lance or bullet but through ideas and dialogue.

Sequence of Reforms: In 1858 the first major outcome was the “Government of India: An act for better Government of India” was presented on 2nd August 1858. This was an act which gave Indian people the legal status of colonial subject. It may not sound well however it was better than having no status during. “From then on, the governance of India was often reviewed and the UK Parliament passed a total of 196 Local, Private and Public Acts regarding India and Indian matters during the years between 1858 and 1947” (Parliament UK). Most of them gave a bit more autonomy and liberty to Indian people than the previous law, leading finally towards independence. The language and intent of the proclamation of Queen Victoria, which was published by the Governor General on November 1st 1858 in Allahabad was comforting. She apologized for the rule of EIC and made promises for treating Indians as equals. “We deeply lament the evils and misery which have been brought upon India by the acts of ambitious Men, who have deceived their Countrymen, by false reports, and led them into open Rebellion”

(Godley, 1908). She firmly pledged to Indians not to wage expansion wars within India. “We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions; and while we will permit no aggression upon our dominions or our rights, to be attempted with impunity, we shall sanction no encroachment on those of others. We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of native princes as our own; and we desire that they as well as our own subjects, should enjoy that prosperity and that social advancement which can only be secured by internal peace and good government” (Godley, 1908).

One, major discrimination, during the time of EIC was the opportunity to work under the company. High posts were only offered to British and locals were not given equal opportunity. In her proclamation Queen announce equal opportunity, “It is our further will that, so far as may be, our subjects, of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified, by their education, ability, and integrity, duly to discharge” (East India Proclamation, 1858). The first step towards introducing Indian representation into legislation was taken in 1861. Along with central legislative council, provincial council were also formed and extended to ‘non-official’ members. “An attempt was made, therefore, by the Indian Councils Act of 1861 to establish closer contact between government and the governed. The Act provided for the enlargement of the Governor-General's Executive Council to form a Legislative Council, reconstituted and likewise enlarged the Legislative Councils in Madras and Bombay, and provided for the creation of similar Councils in Bengal, the North-Western Provinces and the Punjab; and it prescribed that at least half the new or ' additional ' members should in each case be chosen from outside the ranks of the civil service. Since most of the ' non-official ' members thus chosen were Indians, the Act of 1861 may be said to have introduced the representative principle into the Indian constitution. But it was by no means a concession of the representative government which Macaulay had so firmly ruled out a generation earlier. The majority in the Councils was still officials, and the small groups of non-official members were nominated by the Governors, not elected. Their powers, moreover, were purely legislative. They could not even ask questions about, still less discuss, executive business. The conduct of administration, including all matters of finance, remained in the exclusive control of the wholly official Executive Councils” (Coupland, 1944, p 21). The reforms which poured a new life in the politics of Sub-continent were Indian Councils Act 1892. In this act the Indians, which were previously nominated by the Viceroy now were to be elected

by the people India. In other sense Indians were introduced to democracy. “The Act also made room for an elective element in the country and thus partly fulfilled the Congress demand. The members were, in theory, nominated by the head of the Government, but regulations were made under the Act by which some of the members were to be filled by representatives of different bodies and interests, such as corporations, municipalities, district boards, associations of landholders, universities and chambers of commerce. The system was not strictly a system of election, for elective bodies could only recommend their representatives to Head of Government for nominations. In practice, however, nomination was never refused.” (Qureshi, 1984, p 821). At this moment Sir Syed expressed his concerns regarding the protection of rights of Muslims. He foresighted the Hindu dominance through this limited form of democracy. His fears were realized after the partition of Bengal in 1905. The agitation of Hindus paved the way for the creation of Muslim League in 1906. British introduced Morley Minto reforms or Indian Councils Act 1909. These reforms were the most important for Muslims in two ways first the demand of Separate Electorates was officially accepted and secondly British did not reverse the Partition of Bengal. The central and provincial councils were also expanded with the increase of elected members. “The grant of separate electorates to the Muslims established legally and constitutionally the status of the Muslim community in the Sub-Continent as a distinct entity and that of the Muslim League as the only important Muslim organization” (Qureshi, 1984, p 834) . The Government of India Act 1919 further reduced the number of official members and for the first time the number of elected members was more than the official members. The system of diarchy was also introduced in the provinces and gave limited powers to the elected government in the provinces. By reducing the voters’ qualification more Indians were able to take part in the process of electing their representatives. This chain of legislative reforms did not stop here. The political parties of India were becoming more and more active and clear about their objectives and methodology. The Congress had asked the full independence on 24th January 1929. The Three Round Table conferences show the extent of the importance of the local political parties for the legislation in India. Finally the Act of India 1935 fulfilled many demands of Indians generally. Although it was not completely acceptable for all the political parties, it was agreed upon by most with reservations and parties took part in the elections of 1937. The political governments were formed in provinces and provinces were given almost full autonomy in their

affairs. This was last achievement before reaching on the final destination, Independence, for the people of India.