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The Sepoy Mutiny (1857) : A Landmark Event in the Modern Indian History

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Abstract

Indian people are more conscious and wakeful about the freedom, equality, and democratic norm and values than the other people of South Asia because of their long struggle against the British colonial rule to achieve the sovereignty. The base point of their struggle was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. That is why the Sepoy Mutiny is considered as an epoch-making event in the history of India. Although, some critics call it a simple military coup by some disgruntled soldiers, but even so, it brought a big wave in the Indian politics. Therefore, it can be considered as a great upheaval event. It marked the end of the old era and the beginning of the new era. In fact, before Sepoy Mutiny, Indians did not have a sense of broad national unity; they had a sense of narrow locality. They used to fight with each other. But after this rebellion, they started to raise voices against the oppression of foreign rule. Many political organizations were formed to organize people. Many great leaders were born. There were many movements for independence under their leadership. Countless people sacrificed their lives. Many were jailed. Thus, since the beginning of the 20th century, the fierce political consciousness and the broad sense of national unity, i.e. "India is one, we are all Indians, independence is our birthright" the base point of which was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. However, this rebellion was not successful. Even so, it serves as guidance for future revolution. This paper basically focuses on the Sepoy Mutiny and its significant impacts.

Keywords

Enfield rifle, Lord Dalhousie, Doctrine of Lapse, Nana Sahib, Laxmibai, Jungbahadur Rana, Naya Muluk.

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1. Background

The pain of slavery had been suffered by the native Indian people for hundreds of years. This process continued from the reign of the Khilaji dynasty (1290-1320) until the Tughlaq (1321-1414), Johampur Sultanate (1415-1479), Syed, Lodi, and Mughal empire. The rulers of all these mentioned dynasties were foreigners. But when the British came from Britain and started their rule in India after defeating the Mughals, then the exploitation, oppression, injustice and tyranny of the Indian people reached to extreme limits. To get freedom from the tyranny of the British rule, patriotic Indian people formed many associations and organizations. Many leaders appeared. There were many kinds of political activities and movements under the leadership of great leaders like Gopalkrishna Gokhale, Balgangadhar Tilak, Subhaschandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi. As a result of these movements, the British government was forced to liberate India on 15 August, 1947. People consider this as an epoch-making event because it was an event of freedom from British slavery. However, looking at it from one side, when the British ruled India for almost 200 years, it seems that they did gross injustice and atrocities on the Indians with harsh exploitation and oppression. But looking at it from the other side, no one can disagree that the foundation of the modern and powerful India that is today seems as the result of the British rule.

Thus, it has both positive and negative aspects. In fact, today's vast India was a gift of British rule. The creation of a vast India by uniting many Indian states that were divided into fragments was certainly a positive aspect. Similarly, the construction of today's huge and convenient cities like Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai was the result of the British rule. The important contribution of the British was to indirectly develop a broad sense of nationalism among Indians by expanding telegraph, telephone and railway services across India, and by promoting English education to make Indians qualified and capable in every field, and trying to end the evil, bad practices, and

superstitions prevalent in Indian society. However, these things were developed by the British government for their own interests, i.e. to make their empire in stronger and more sustainable. But it had the opposite result - Indians who were scattered in different states or provinces were brought to a single point of contact and the feeling of national unity was awakened. The Sipoy Mutiny showed the British government that it is not easy to rule India as before. In fact, even if this rebellion could be suppressed immediately, there was still a possibility that side effects would come out of it in the future. Therefore, after this incident, the British government focused its attention on improving the internal situation of India.

2. Research Methodology

The presented research paper has been prepared on the basis of primary and secondary source materials. Analytical, descriptive and comparative methods have been used to study the source materials obtained. After studying and analyzing the books, texts, articles written by related scholars, the conclusion is presented at the end.

3. The Nature of the Mutiny

After the Plassey war in 1757, the Indians rebelled against the oppression of the British Empire established in India for the first time in 1857 because the British Empire in India was a disgrace, a shameful incident for the Indian people. The empire was established in India through fraud, deceit and conspiracy. That is why all the classes there were dissatisfied. Thus exactly 100 years after the beginning of British rule in India, there was a revolt, which is called the "Sepoy Mutiny" because this rebellion started from the military barracks. How the Mutiny started was when the new Enfield rifle was given to the Indian Militants (Sepoy). To load it, the militant had to bite off the ends of lubricated cartridges. A rumour spread among the militant that the grease used to lubricate the cartridges was a mixture of pigs' and cows' lard; thus, to have oral contact with it was an insult to both Muslims and Hindus. They became furious. Because cows are considered sacred for Hindus and pigs are forbidden for Muslims, they became dissatisfied (Britannica.com/Indian Mutiny). There had been rumours that the British sought to destroy the religion of the Indian people, and forcing the native soldiers to break their sacred code would have certainly added to this rumor, as it apparently did (Edwards, 1975 & David, 2007).

Due to this tide of discontent, the revolt started and in a short time it spread all over India (Majumdar, 1963 & Sen, 1995). In this rebellion thousands of British soldiers and civilians were killed, while Indian casualties have been estimated as reaching into the hundreds of thousands. The war was marked by incredibly cruel acts, encompassing the murder of noncombatant women and children, the destruction of cities, and the macabre execution of alleged mutineers by being blown from cannons (David, 2002).

Various scholars have presented their own views on the nature of this rebellion. In particular, there are two different opinions in this regard - the rebellion of 1857 was just an outcry against the mistreatment of the Indian soldiers or it was a movement of the entire Indian people against the British Empire. Regarding these two different ideas, Indian and foreign historians have presented their own arguments. Some scholars call this revolt as India's first independence movement. According to them, it was the First War of Independence, beginning a movement that would reach its apogee some ninety years later (David, 2002 and Embree, 1963) because this movement did not take place only in the activism and involvement of any class, caste or community in India. It was made possible by the joint efforts of both Hindus and Muslims. In this movement, both appeared as each other's helpers and companions whereas at other times, Hindus and Muslims did not get along well. During the Mughal period, Hindus were brutalized by Muslims. In India, there are still occasional conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in the name of religion. But in this rebellion, both of them united against the mistreatment of the British known as Firangees. Therefore, the scholars mentioned that it was the first well-planned and organized political and military coup with the aim of ending the British power in India.

But according to other scholars, it was only a military coup involving millions of soldiers. There was no element or medium to make it popular. Only a few of the soldiers' discontent symbolized the culmination. According to Indian historian R.C. Majumdar and S.N. Sen, this rebellion cannot be called the first freedom movement because at that time, national sentiment had not yet developed in India. India was only a geographical expression. Each leader who participated in the uprising had personal interests greater than the national interests. As Peshwa's adopted son Nana Sahib wanted to maintain his pension. Similarly, Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi was also

trying to regain her rights and concessions. There was no uniformity in any of them and there was no unity to give the rebellion a national form. Also, not all people participated in the uprising. Therefore, this revolt was not a national movement but only a soldier's revolt. It was never all-Indian in character, but was localized, restricted and poorly organized. Only one of the three provincial armies mutinied; and all the Indian sepoy did not rise against the British Government. Similarly, important Indian princes, chiefs and thousands of landlords sided with the English (Majumdar, 1963 & Sen,1995). Finally, no matter what anyone says, this Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 has a very important place in Modern Indian history as it prepared the necessary background for the freedom movement in the future. In fact, this rebellion was a struggle between eastern and western ideologies. Because of this, the distance between the two increased after the rebellion.

Although this rebellion failed, but it brought about a massive change in the mentality and outlook both the British and Indian sides. The British understood very well that they should not do anything to harm the religion and culture of Indians. As a result, the British became interested in studying Indian civilization and culture. Similarly, the interest towards English language and literature also increased among Indians. Educated Indians began to take pride in speaking and writing the English language. The good and bad effects and impacts of this rebellion in the history of India can be studied in the following points.

4. Effects and Impacts of the Mutiny

4.1 End of Company Rule

After this revolt, the East India Company was abolished in favour of the direct rule of India by the British government (Britannica. com/ Indian Mutiny). Around the 16th and 17th centuries, an organization called the English East India Company was established to trade with eastern countries. This company was expanding its empire in India in the early years. But after this revolt, direct rule was conducted in India in the name of the British Crown. Because of this rebellion, the British government felt that a commercial organization (Trade Company) could no longer hold the vast Indian subcontinent under its control. Therefore, after this rebellion, the British government started direct rule in India in the name of the British Emperor. Now Governor

General would work as a Viceroy (Majumdar, 1963). Likewise, the Board of Control and the Board of Directors were abolished and the post of Secretary of state for India was established instead.

4.2 Improvement in the Policy towards Raja Rajautas

If the Raja Rajautas (petty rulers) of various Principalities of India were childless, the practice of adopting a son and making the adopted son the heir of his kingdom was going on since ancient times. But the Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, by applying the Doctrine of Lapse, made a rule that no one can adopt a son for the inheritance of the state, but only for the right of personal property. Applying this principle, Lord Dalhousie merged the states of Satara, Nagpur, Jhansi into the British Empire (Britannica.com/Indian Mutiny). Therefore, the rulers of those states wanted to maintain their rights by defeating the British by using all their power during the rebellion. In addition to this, Lord Dalhousie also withdrew the concessions provided in the form of pensions and Jagirs to the Rajarajautas. Due to this, the Indian rulers who were the great benefactors of the British also became the staunch enemies of the British. Therefore, after this rebellion, the British government started to adopt a soft policy towards the Rajarajautas. An environment was created for them to live respectfully in India. Also, apart from the right to adopt children, the honorary title given to them was kept intact.

4.3 Changes in Foreign Policy

After this rebellion, there were changes in the foreign policy of the British Indian government. India's foreign policy was determined based on the political activities of Europe. It did not have any separate independent foreign policy. India's foreign policy began to be governed by Britain, that is, Britain's foreign policy became India's foreign policy. For this reason, when Britain joined the Allied Powers in the First and Second World Wars, India also automatically joined the war from the same group. But one good result of this was that the British government was able to divert its attention from foreign policy and focus it on the internal development of India.

4.4 Extensive Reform in Military Organization

After this rebellion, the British began to be particularly wary of the Indian soldiers. Therefore, the organization of the Indian Army in the following days was done keeping in mind the possibility of a

similar rebellion in the future. By reducing the number of Indian soldiers in India, the number of European troops was increased. Army regiments were formed on the basis of race and caste. Instead of Brahmins, more Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs and Gorkhas were recruited into the army. The artillery was placed under the control of the British forces. Thus the Indian army was also extensively reorganized (Britannica.com/Indian Mutiny).

In fact, this rebellion was a mutual struggle between Eastern and Western ideologies. After the uprising, the gap between the two grew. Both of them started hating each other, that is, hatred towards each other arose in both of their minds. While the Indians considered the British to be invaders, non-Aryans, "Mlecchas" (untouchable caste), the British considered Indians to be unfaithful, uncivilized and wild. This feeling of hatred for each other gradually increased. During the freedom movement, it became such a wound that there was no cure for.

4.5 Split between Hindus and Muslims

Although Hindus and Muslims participated jointly in this rebellion, Muslims showed more activity. That is why Muslims were oppressed more than Hindus while controlling the rebellion. Only 24 Muslim princes were hanged in Delhi. But the Hindus did not resist the atrocities being committed on the Muslims and watched them as a spectacle. Due to this, the Muslims stopped believing in the Hindus. They started looking at each other with hatred. Therefore, Indian society has become a place of caste conflict. Riots started between Hindus and Muslims in India. As a result, vast India was divided into Hindustan and Pakistan in the name of religion. However, the enmity between these two has not stopped till today.

4.6 Impact on Nepal

The revolt of 1857 in India had an indirect effect on the politics of Nepal. The Nepalese Army played an important role in suppressing this rebellion. Especially in Northern India, Lucknow, Banaras, Patna etc., the Nepalese army helped a lot to suppress the rebellion (Upadhyay, 1992 & Tyagi 1974). The Prime Minister of Nepal, Jung Bahadur Rana himself led the Nepalese army and helped the British (Hibbert, 1980). However, in the beginning, the British government flatly rejected Nepal's proposal to help the British in suppressing the Sepoy Mutiny. Because by cooperating with a small country like

Nepal, a superpower like Britain did not want to let its honor and reputation be tarnished. For this reason, the British Resident in Kathmandu refused to meet the special envoy sent by the Nepal Palace to discuss this matter (Rana, 1998 & Gorkhali, 2078 BS). But later, when the situation became complicated, that is, when the rebellion took a violent form, the British government accepted Nepal's offer of help. The troops from Nepal especially helped to suppress the rebellion in Northern India. The Nepalese army succeeded in suppressing the rebellion by entering the city of Lucknow. Old Gorakh Paltan played a big role in this (Khatri, 2041 B.S.). After this there was widespread looting. Especially the property of Nawab Bajid Ali Shah, Begum Kothi was looted. which is still famous all over India by "Lucknow Loot". 40 bullock carts wealth was brought from there to Nepal. But Jung Bahadur Rana made it his personal property without collecting it in the treasury of the state. The Nepalese soldiers who participated in the rebellion were also dissatisfied with him because the soldiers who participated in the recently concluded Nepal-Tibet War had received various honorary titles. But the soldiers who participated in it did not get any respect. Also, it was an unnecessary interference in the internal affairs of another country. First 6 thousand and later 14 thousand Nepalese troops went to suppress this rebellion, but only 14 thousand of them could return. Where did the remaining 6,000 go? (Rana, 2017 & J.B. Rana, 1998).

From this incident, It is also known that Nepalese are very simple and straightforward race. After taking control of the Nawab's palace in Lucknow during the suppression of the rebellion, the indecent behaviour of the Nepalese Gorkha forces showed that they were illiterate, guileless as well as rude and stupid. Because even though they found a huge treasure of precious gems like diamond, emerald, muga, ruby in the palace of the Nawab, the Nepalese army did not understand its value. For example, the Gorkha army, who didn't understand the value of pearls even though they found a garlands of pearls woven on a gold thread, but they bit the pearl grains with their teeth to get the gold thread. That's why the Nepalese army made themselves a laughing stock in front of everyone by doing what was dishonorable to the Nepalese race (Uprety, Personal Communication). However, in appreciation of the Nepalese's courage and self-sacrificing support, the British government returned some of the territories taken from Nepal by the Sugauli Treaty. In other words, for

supporting to suppress this rebellion, Nepal got back Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur as well as the territories from Rapti to Kali river (Rana, 2017). This region is also known as “Naya Muluk”, which was brought back to Nepal from the British by Jung Bahadur. Due to this, Nepal and Britain became close friends of each other. After getting the support of the British, it became easier for the Rana rulers to rule more autocratically in Nepal. And until the British left India in 1947, the Ranas were able to rule freely in Nepal.

After the British government brutally suppressed this rebellion with the help of the Nepalese army, rebel leaders such as Nana Sahib, Awadh’s Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rana Beni Madho, and Khan Bahadur Khan still refused to yield. This remnant slipped into Nepal, hoping to run a guerilla war from the Nepal Terai jungle. The rebels appealed to the Nepali leaders to join their fight against the rapacious British, who had no respect for customs of Hindus and Muslims. However, these appeals were dismissed. Nepal’s leadership did not immediately act against the Indian rebels because many natives of the Terai sympathized with the rebels. Instead, Jung Bahadur got the British to send troops into Nepal. The British obliged - all that remained of the accursed Rebellion now hid in the Terai. When the rebels proved too elusive for the British, Jung Bahadur led his army into the Terai in November 1859. Within a month all rebels were killed or captured. The Great Indian Rebellion was thus unceremoniously snuffed out in Nepal’s Terai. Nana Sahib and a few others had died of illness just before this sad end. The remaining leaders were carted back to India in chains and were summarily hanged. However, Begum Hazrat Mahal, her son, and the rebels’ womenfolk received asylum in Nepal (Upadhyaya, 2013 & dnaindia.com).

5. Significance of the Mutiny

What we know from studying the history of the world is that if a people’s movement in any country is successful, it is called a revolution, if it fails; it is simply called a revolt. But what should be noted is that even if the rebellion fails for the time being, it will prepare the necessary environment and conditions for the future revolution. There have been many rebellions in the world, which are impossible to count. As in the history of China, the Taiping Rebellion, Boxer Uprising, and many more can be taken, which prepared the necessary background for the Chinese revolution of 1911. Similarly, what can be said about the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in India, this mutiny failed at that

time (Yadav, 1996). However, it seems to have a great far-reaching significance in the struggle for freedom of the Indian people. Therefore, it includes both successful and unsuccessful sides. As this rebellion failed on the one hand because it did not immediately end the British rule in India. But on the other hand, it was also successful because it prepared the necessary background for future freedom movements. Also, as a result of this incident, it helped the Indian people to develop political consciousness regarding national unity, freedom, equality, and democratic norms and values. It awakened the fight against foreign exploitation, oppression, injustice and tyranny. They had a sense of broad nationalism that “India is one, we are all Indians”. In this context, it seems relevant to present an example here, as in the World War I and II Nepal could not get back any territory even after such a big help to British. Because now the British government could not give its territory back to Nepal even if it wanted to. While Nepal got back some of the territory it had lost through the Sugauli Treaty as a gift due to its support in this Sepoy Mutiny. But now the political situation in India was not as easy as before. Indian people had become more conscious. Therefore, knowing that the Indian people would be fiercely opposed, the British could not return any territory to Nepal as a gift even if they wanted to (Uprety, Personal Communication).

Although this rebellion could be suppressed immediately, there was still a possibility that it could have negative consequences in the future. Therefore, after this incident, the British government focused its attention on improving India’s internal situation. In this process, plans were made for the development of railways, wires, roads, agriculture, irrigation, manufacturing and industry in India. Various measures were taken to maintain peace and order in the country. They started adopting the process of legal development to bring stability to the governance system. From here on in the history of India, Indian people were gradually given the opportunity to participate in the governance of their country. In India, the democratic rule has been established (Britannica.com/Indian Mutiny). From this, it seems that the middle ages in the history of India have ended and the modern era has begun.

6. Conclusion

Based on the illustrations mentioned above, in the end, it can be said that both side (British government and Indian People) learned a

good lesson from this rebellion. Like the British, the Indian people also realized that they had many weaknesses due to the failure of this revolt. And saw the need to improve it in the future. In this process, the Indian people learned this lesson that they cannot be freed from the British colonial ruled only on the basis of army, power and war, but they should adopt the policy of non-cooperation and non-violence against the British by getting the support and assistance of all classes. For their patriotism, this revolt made it clear that the Indian people should learn the lessons of sacrifice, and advance the spirit of national unity and nationality in the form of nationalism. During the time, motivated by the feeling of nation and nationalism, Indian people participated in the Indian National Congress founded in 1885. The nationalist Indians realized that success requires materials, qualified leadership, military organization, definite objectives, well-planned programs and plans for success. As a result, the freedom movement, which had been fighting against the British colonial rule for a long time, was able to achieve success in 1947.

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