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CHAPTER 4

1857 Revolt

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CHAPTER 4

1857 Revolt

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- Situations in India Before the 1857 Revolt
- Uprisings and Revolts Before 1857
- The Revolt of 1857
- Why the Revolt Failed
- Consequences of the Revolt
- Views and Books on the 1857 Revolt
- Timeline of the 1857 Revolt

Situations in India Before the 1857 Revolt

Several conditions created anger among the people of India before 1857:

- **Heavy land revenue:** Colonial land revenue settlements put a heavy burden of new taxes on peasants, and many were evicted from their land.
- **Exploitation by middlemen:** A growing class of intermediary revenue collectors, tenants and moneylenders started exploiting farmers and peasants.
- **Tribal lands taxed:** Revenue administration expanded, and land revenue began to be collected on tribal land as well.
- **Decline of Indian industry:** Indigenous industry was destroyed and British manufactured goods were promoted.
- **Foreign rule:** The foreign character of British rule.

All these factors sparked a number of revolts, movements and armed uprisings.

Uprisings and Revolts Before 1857

Civil Uprisings

Revolt	Year	Area	Leader / Key Fact
Sanyasi Revolt	1763–1800	Bihar and Bengal	Majnu Shah and Musa Shah
Revolt of the Moamarias	1769–99	Assam and parts of present-day Bangladesh	Krishnanarayan
Poligars' Revolt	1795–1805	Tinnevelly, Ramnathapuram	—
Paika Rebellion	1817	Orissa	Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar and Dinabandhu Santra
Ahom Revolt	1828	Assam	Gomdhar Konwar and Maharaja Purandhar Singh
Revolt of the Raja of Vizianagaram	—	Northern Circars	—

Revolt	Year	Area	Leader / Key Fact
Surat Salt Agitations	1844	Gujarat	Locals of Surat attacked Europeans over the increase in salt duty
Wahabi Movement	1830–61	Bihar, Bengal, North West Frontier Province, Punjab, etc.	An Islamic revivalist movement started by Syed Ahmed of Rai Bareilly

Peasant Movements

Movement	Year	Area	Key Fact
Pagal Panthis	1825–35	Bengal	Karam Shah rose against the zamindars
Moplah Uprisings	1836–1854	Malabar region of Kerala	Against the hike in revenue demand and the reduction in field size

Tribal Revolts

Revolt	Year	Area	Leader / Key Fact
Pahariya Rebellion	1778	Raj Mahal Hills	—
Ho and Munda Uprisings	1820–22, 1831–37, 1899–1900	Chhotanagpur region	Birsa Munda led the rebellion in 1899–1900
Santhal Rebellion	1855–56	Raj Mahal Hills (Bihar)	Sidhu and Kanhu
Khond Uprisings	1837–1856	Hilly tracts from Tamil Nadu to Bengal	Chakra Bisoi

Sepoy Mutinies

- **Vellore Mutiny** – 1806
- **Revolt of the Grenadier Company** – 1825, in Assam
- **Mutiny in Sholapur** – 1833

EXAM TIP

Match-the-following questions often pair a revolt with its leader. Remember: **Santhal** – Sidhu & Kanhu, **Munda** – Birsa Munda, **Khond** – Chakra Bisoi, **Paika** – Bakshi Jagabandhu, **Pagal Panthis** – Karam Shah.

The Revolt of 1857

Immediate Cause: The Greased Cartridges

- The cartridge of the new rifle introduced by the British had to be bitten off before loading.
- The grease on it was reportedly made of **beef and pig fat**. The cow was sacred to the Hindus, and the pig was taboo for the Muslims.
- This led to revolt in the army.

How the Revolt Began

- The **19th Native Infantry at Berhampore** (West Bengal) refused to use the newly introduced **Enfield rifle** and mutinied in **February 1857**. It was disbanded in March 1857.

- **Mangal Pandey**, a young sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry, fired at the sergeant major of his unit at **Barrackpore**.
- He was executed on **April 8, 1857**, which further strengthened the anger among the sepoys.
- The revolt began at **Meerut**, 58 km from Delhi, on **May 10, 1857**.
- The sepoys chose **Bahadur Shah**, the last Mughal king, as the symbol of the revolt and started marching towards Delhi.

Spread of the Revolt and Its Leaders

- **Delhi:** General **Bakht Khan**, who had led the revolt of the Bareilly troops, brought them to Delhi.
- **Kanpur: Nana Saheb**, the adopted son of the last Peshwa Baji Rao II, fought against the British.
- **Lucknow: Begum Hazrat Mahal** took over the reins at Lucknow, where the rebellion broke out on June 4, 1857.
- **Bihar:** The revolt was led by **Kunwar Singh**.
- **Faizabad (Awadh): Maulvi Ahmadullah** was another outstanding leader. He emerged as one of the revolt's acknowledged leaders once it broke out in Awadh in May 1857.
- **Jhansi:** The most outstanding leader of the revolt was **Rani Laxmibai**, who led the sepoys at Jhansi. She was joined by **Tantia Tope**, a close associate of Nana Saheb. The local ruler, the Sindhia, sided with the English and took shelter at Agra.
- **Baghpat: Shah Mal**, a villager of Pargana Baraut (Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh), organised the headmen and peasants of 84 villages (called *chaurasi desh*). He marched at night from village to village, urging people to rebel against British rule. In July 1857, he was killed by an English officer, Dunlop.

Place of Revolt	Indian Leader	British Leader Who Suppressed It
Delhi	General Bakht Khan	John Nicholson
Kanpur	Nana Saheb	Sir Colin Campbell
Lucknow	Begum Hazrat Mahal	Henry Lawrence, Colin Campbell
Bareilly	Khan Bahadur	—
Bihar	Kunwar Singh	William Taylor
Faizabad	Maulvi Ahmadullah	—
Jhansi	Rani Laxmibai	Sir Hugh Rose
Baghpat	Shah Mal	—
Allahabad	Liyaqat Ali	Colonel James Neill
Benaras	—	Colonel James Neill

EXAM TIP

The table above is one of the most-asked topics. Questions are usually framed as "Who led the revolt at ___?" or "Which British officer recaptured ___?"

British Actions Against the Revolt

- The British captured **Delhi on September 20, 1857**. Emperor Bahadur Shah was exiled to **Rangoon**, where he died in **1862**. With this, the House of the Mughals came to an end.

- Sir Colin Campbell occupied **Kanpur on December 6, 1857**.
- The Rani of Jhansi died on the battlefield in **June 1858**. Jhansi was recaptured by Sir Hugh Rose.
- Kunwar Singh, Tantia Tope, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Rao Sahib (brother of Nana Saheb) and Maulvi Ahmadullah were all dead. The Begum of Awadh was forced to hide in Nepal.
- By the end of **1859**, British authority over India was fully re-established.

Why the Revolt Failed

- **No all-India participation:** The eastern, southern and western parts of India remained more or less unaffected.
- **Not all classes joined:** Certain classes and groups did not join and, in fact, worked against the revolt.
- **Educated Indians stayed away:** They viewed the revolt as backward-looking.
- **Indian rulers helped the British:** Most Indian rulers refused to join and often actively helped the British. These included the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkar of Indore, the rulers of Patiala, Sindh and other Sikh chieftains, and the Maharaja of Kashmir.

> **REMEMBER**
> Though the revolt failed, there was complete cooperation between Hindus and Muslims during the entire revolt.

Consequences of the Revolt

- **Government of India Act, 1858:** On **August 2, 1858**, the British Parliament passed the Act for the Better Government of India.
- **Rule of the Crown:** The Act declared **Queen Victoria** the sovereign (head) of British India. A **Secretary of State for India** (a member of the British cabinet) was appointed.
- **Company rule ended:** The British Crown took direct responsibility for administering India, and Company rule was abolished.
- **Queen's Proclamation:** Issued on **November 1, 1858** by Lord Canning. Through it, the Governor-General got the title of **Viceroy**. The proclamation ended the era of annexation and expansion, and the Doctrine of Lapse was withdrawn.
- **Indian states:** They now had to recognise the paramountcy of the British Crown and were treated as parts of a single charge.
- **Equal opportunity in services:** Government services were opened to all irrespective of race or creed. In line with the Queen's Proclamation, the **Indian Civil Service Act of 1861** was passed.
- **Army reorganised:** British military policy was now based on **"division and counterpoise"**.
  - The British could no longer depend on Indian loyalty, so the number of Indian soldiers was drastically reduced and the number of European soldiers was increased.
  - **Divide and rule** was adopted: separate units were created on the basis of caste, community and region.
  - Recruits were drawn from the "martial" races of Punjab, Nepal and the north-western frontier, who had stayed loyal to the British during the revolt.
  - All higher posts in the army and the artillery departments were reserved for Europeans.

Views and Books on the 1857 Revolt

Different Views on the Revolt

Historian / Writer	Described the Revolt As
R.C. Majumdar	"Neither First, nor National, nor a War of Independence"
V.D. Savarkar	"War of Independence"
Lawrence and Seeley	"Mere sepoy mutiny"
T.R. Holmes	"A conflict between civilisation and barbarism"

Books Written on the Revolt

Author	Book
Karl Marx	*The First Indian War of Independence*
Sayed Ahmad Khan	*Causes of the Indian Revolt*
V.D. Savarkar	*The Indian War of Independence*
R.C. Majumdar	*The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*

Timeline of the 1857 Revolt

- **Feb 1857** — 19th Native Infantry at Berhampore refuses the Enfield rifle
- **Mar 1857** — 19th Native Infantry disbanded
- **8 Apr 1857** — Mangal Pandey executed
- **10 May 1857** — Revolt begins at Meerut
- **4 Jun 1857** — Rebellion breaks out at Lucknow
- **Jul 1857** — Shah Mal killed
- **20 Sep 1857** — British recapture Delhi
- **6 Dec 1857** — Colin Campbell occupies Kanpur
- **Jun 1858** — Rani Laxmibai dies on the battlefield
- **2 Aug 1858** — Act for the Better Government of India passed
- **1 Nov 1858** — Queen's Proclamation by Lord Canning
- **1859** — British authority fully re-established
- **1861** — Indian Civil Service Act
- **1862** — Bahadur Shah dies in Rangoon

QUICK REVISION

Chapter 4 at a Glance

1. Land revenue burden, exploitation by middlemen, decline of Indian industry and foreign rule caused many revolts before 1857.
2. Major tribal revolts: Santhal (Sidhu & Kanhu), Munda (Birsa Munda), Khond (Chakra Bisoi).
3. Immediate cause of 1857: cartridges greased with beef and pig fat.
4. Mangal Pandey fired at Barrackpore and was executed on 8 April 1857.
5. The revolt began at Meerut on 10 May 1857; Bahadur Shah was made its symbol.
6. Key leaders: Bakht Khan (Delhi), Nana Saheb (Kanpur), Begum Hazrat Mahal (Lucknow), Kunwar Singh (Bihar), Rani Laxmibai (Jhansi).
7. Delhi was recaptured on 20 Sep 1857; Bahadur Shah was exiled to Rangoon (died 1862).
8. It failed due to lack of all-India participation and because Indian rulers and educated Indians did not support it.
9. The Act of 1858 ended Company rule; the Queen's Proclamation (1 Nov 1858) gave the Governor-General the title of Viceroy.
10. Savarkar called it the "War of Independence"; R.C. Majumdar said it was "neither First, nor National, nor a War of Independence".