

UNIT 37 – UPSC - Crown takes over Indian Government

India's History : Modern India : British Crown takes over the Indian Government : 1858

Aftermath of 1857



By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the largest and richest empire in the world. This naturally gave rise to the belief that the British themselves, were the chosen race; chosen to bring the benefits of western civilization to the less developed and civilized areas of the world. This white supremacy was enforced in Britain's colonies, especially in India and naturally, saw much native opposition. Indian uprisings against British rule, however, were unsuccessful due to the superior technology and organization of the British army.

In 1857, with the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, India witnessed its first war of independence against the British. Thanks to the efficiency of British media coverage, the Britishers followed the developments of the mutiny avidly. The British saw the India Mutiny as a fight against barbarians who were rejecting the civilizing influence of Victorian Britain. But as the suppression developed, the atrocities committed by both sides became obvious. The British armies swept across Northern India in an enraged and cruel rampage of rape, murder and savagery, which shocked Victorian society.

The Background, 1857

British presence in India stretched all the way from the 17th century when the East India Company (EIC) acquired its first territory in Bombay to 1947 when India and Pakistan were granted self rule. Over the years the EIC expanded by both direct (force) and indirect (economic) means eventually, chasing the French out (after the War of Plassey, 1757) and dominating the whole of the Indian sub-continent.

British rule in India rested on its military might and as long as the British army in India was invincible, British rule was assured. This of course depended on the Indian army, which comprised of Indian troops under British officers.

British rule inevitable brought western influences into India. The spread of Christianity was to cause great unease among the Indians. Evangelical Christian missionaries had little or no understanding and respect for India's ancient faiths and their efforts to convert many natives quickly brought clashes with the local religious establishments. As the missionaries were mostly British citizens, the Colonial Administration often had to

intervene to protect them, which naturally gave an impression of official condolence for Christianity.

It was against this backdrop of uneasiness in which the mutiny erupted in 1857. But the spark was interestingly not so much of religious clashes, but the grease used in the new Enfield rifle. The cartridge of the Enfield rifle was heavily greased - with animal fat, to facilitate an easier load into the muzzle. Rumors began to circulate among sepoys that the grease was made of cow (sacred to Hindus) and pig (taboo to Muslims) fat. As such, biting such a cartridge was sacrilegious to both Hindus and Muslims alike. Their British officers realized their mistake and changed the grease to vegetable oils, but in this atmosphere of distrust, the mutiny seemed inevitable.

Meerut

Meerut witnessed the first serious outbreak of the Indian Mutiny when angry sepoys broke open the town jail and released their comrades, who had refused to bite the new cartridges. The mutineers, joined by locals soon degenerated into a fanatic mob, which poured into the European settlement and slaughtered any Europeans or Indian Christians there. Whole families, men, women, children and servants, were killed on sight. The settlement was then burned and the mutineers fled to Delhi and proclaimed Bahadur Shah, the last of the Moguls as Emperor.

This, the mutineers had hoped to create a general rising against the British and they turned to Bahadur Shah to lead them. Forced to cooperate, Bahadur Shah accepted the allegiance of the mutineers and became the titular leader of the Indian Mutiny. Most of the Europeans living in Delhi were murdered along with Indian Christians.

The massacre at Meerut provoked a strong British response. In mid-August, British forces, reinforced by Gurkhas from Nepal and the Queen's regiments fresh from the Crimea War began a bloody campaign to re-establish British rule in India. After a short siege, Delhi fell to the British. The Emperor's three sons, Mizra Moghul, Mizra Khizr Sultan and Mizra Abu Bakr along with the mutineers were executed. Although Bahadur Shah was spared, he was deposed and with this, ended some 200 years of Mogul rule in India.

The Aftermath



By the first six months of 1858, the British managed to regain their losses in spite of heavy resistance from the locals. With the relief of Lucknow, the possibility of British defeat became remote. The British saw themselves as dispensers of divine justice and given the initial atrocities committed by the mutineers, their cruelties were simply repayment in kind. Every mutineer was a "black-faced, blood-crazed savage" which do not deserve mercy from the British troops. Their fellow countrymen derided some British like the Governor Lord Canning, who spoke of restraint as "weak" and "indifferent to the sufferings of British subjects". In fact, Canning became known contemptuously as 'clemency Canning'.

After the British recovery, there were few sepoy captured as British soldiers bayoneted any who survived the battle. Whole villages were hanged for some real or imagined sympathy for the mutineers and the widespread looting of Indian property, was common and endorsed by the British officers. Later, convicted mutineers were lashed to the muzzles of cannon and had a round shot fired through their body. It was a cruel punishment intended to blow the body to pieces thus depriving the victim of any hope of entering paradise. Indians called this punishment "the devil's wind".



Apart from the fury reprisals of the British, another significant impact for India was the abolishment of the East India Company. The British Parliament finally realized that it was inappropriate for a private company like the East India Company to exercise such enormous powers and control a land the size of India. In 1858, the East India Company was dissolved, despite a brilliant defense of its achievements by John Stuart Mill, and the administration of India became the responsibility of the Crown. Direct rule on India was exercised through the India Office, a British department of state and till 1947, India became known as the Raj, the Crown Jewel of Queen Victoria's extensive empire.