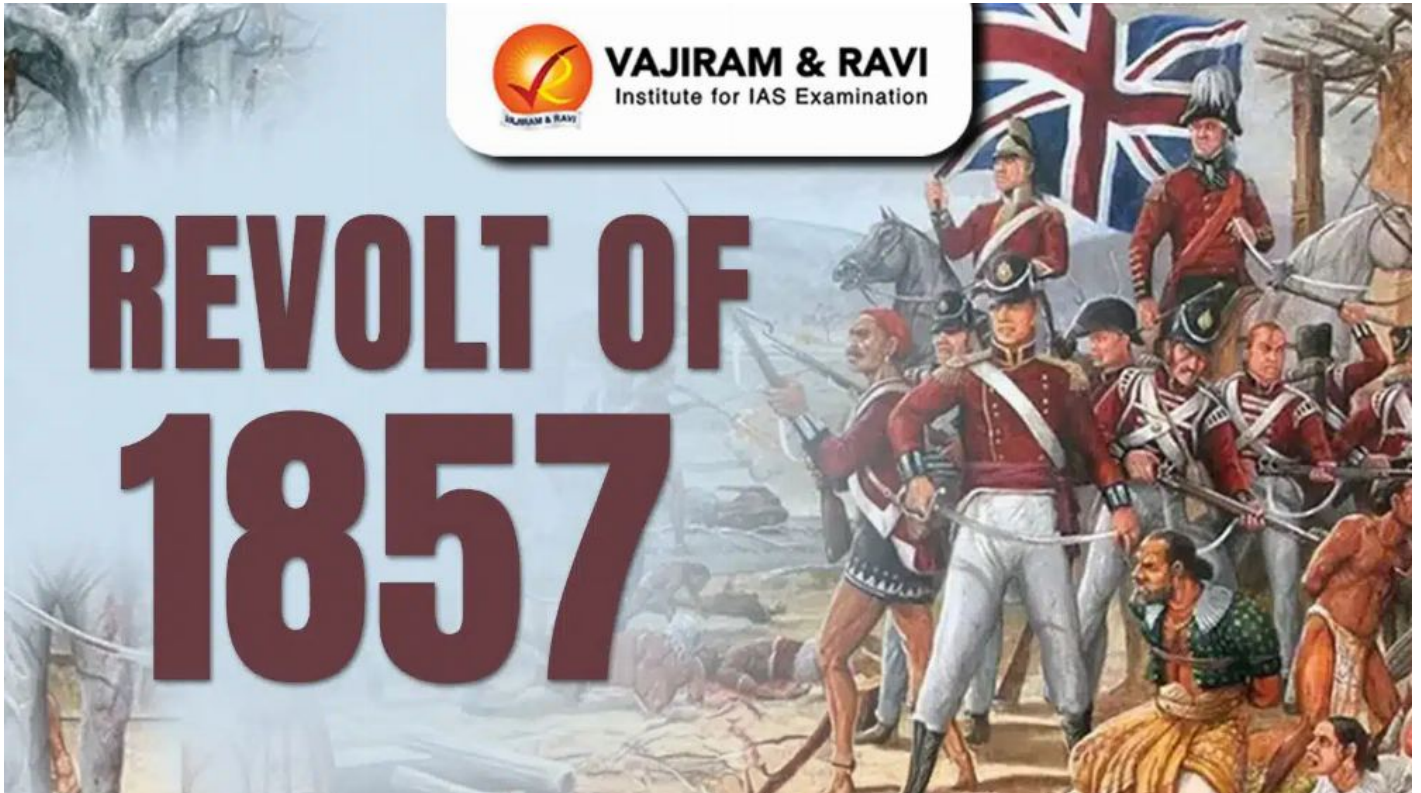


Revolt of 1857, Causes, Leaders, Failure, Consequences, Nature

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Revolt of 1857, also known as the "**First War of Independence**," was the first significant attempt by Indians to end British imperialism. It started on 10 May 1857, first as a sepoy mutiny and later as a concerted effort by Indian rulers under the de jure supervision of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. As the Revolt of 1857 posed a considerable threat to British power, it proved to be a watershed movement for the British perspective towards India.

The **Revolt of 1857** was mainly concentrated across the vast portions of northern India, engulfing the peasantry and other civilian populations that stood side-by-side with their leaders. Many prominent leaders of the Revolt and the common masses fought bravely against the British forces.

Revolt of 1857 Introduction

The **Revolt of 1857** was a major, widespread uprising in India against **British rule in India**. It began on May 10, 1857, as a mutiny of Indian soldiers (sepoys) in Meerut and grew into a massive civilian and military rebellion across northern and central India before being crushed in 1858.

- **First Organised Resistance:** The rebellion of 1857 was the first organised expression of resistance against the British East India Company, beginning as a sepoy revolt and eventually evolving into a widespread mass uprising.
- **Other Names:** The Revolt of 1857 is referred to by various names, including the Sepoy Mutiny and Indian Mutiny by British historians; the **Indian Rebellion of 1857** and Indian Insurrection by Indian historians; and the First War of Independence, a term popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

Revolt of 1857 Causes

Causes of the Revolt of 1857 stemmed from several factors. The British ruthless exploitation of the Indians was common in all, creating the primary reasons for the 1857 Revolt. These pressures had been building up since the British consolidated Bengal in 1764. They first triggered many small rebellions across the country. Eventually, these rising tensions broke out into the Revolt of 1857.

Political Causes of Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 was fueled by widespread discontent with British political policies that undermined the authority and traditions of Indian rulers. These measures not only alienated the ruling class but also disrupted the socio-political fabric of Indian society, sparking widespread resentment. Key political causes include the following:

- **Doctrine of Lapse:** Introduced by Lord Dalhousie, it annexed states without heirs, like Satara, Jhansi, and Nagpur.
- **Annexation of Awadh:** The British annexation of Awadh in 1856 on the grounds of "**misgovernance**" sparked deep local resentment, prompting leaders like Begum Hazrat Mahal to rally rulers and citizens against colonial rule.
- **Disrespect to Rulers:** Indian rulers were disempowered; Bahadur Shah II was humiliated as his successors were barred from the Red Fort.
- **Loss of Privileges:** Landlords, zamindars, and princes lost estates, alienating the elite.
- **Exclusion from High Positions:** Indians were denied key civil and military roles, frustrating the educated and ruling classes.
- **Erosion of Local Authority:** British policies weakened chieftains and tribal leaders, fueling unrest.

Economic Causes of Revolt of 1857

The economic policies of the British led to widespread impoverishment and dissatisfaction among Indians, contributing significantly to the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. These policies disrupted traditional economic systems and benefited the British at the expense of the local population. Key economic causes include the following:

- **Drain of Wealth:** Resources were extracted to fund the British Empire, with Indian revenue financing their administration and military abroad.
- **Destruction of Industries:** British machine-made goods ruined traditional handicrafts, leaving artisans jobless and India dependent on British imports.

- **Agricultural Exploitation:** Forced cultivation of indigo and opium caused famines and food shortages, with severe oppression of indigo farmers.
- **Loss of Aristocracy:** British reforms displaced zamindars, leading to instability and resentment.
- **Widespread Poverty:** Traditional workers faced unemployment as British goods dominated the market, deepening rural and urban distress.
- **Famines:** Cash crops and heavy taxation led to food scarcity and frequent famines.

Social Causes of Revolt of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 was fuelled by widespread social discontent among various sections of Indian society. British policies and reforms disrupted traditional customs, social hierarchies, and religious practices, leading to a deep sense of alienation and resentment against colonial rule.

- **Racial Discrimination:** The British maintained social superiority, treating Indians, including the elite, with contempt.
- **Religious Interference:** British reforms challenged traditional customs, such as the abolition of Sati and the legalisation of widow remarriage, alienating conservative sections.
- **Missionary Activities:** Aggressive Christian missionary efforts created fear of religious conversion among Hindus and Muslims.
- **Alien Rule:** The British remained socially aloof, never integrating with Indian society, which deepened resentment.
- **Loss of Religious and Social Prestige:** Pandits, Maulvis, and other religious leaders lost their traditional influence under British rule.
- **Disruption of Social Order:** Reforms like land revenue policies and the Doctrine of Lapse disrupted traditional power structures, destabilising society.

Administrative Causes of Revolt of 1857

The British administration's policies contributed significantly to the discontent that led to the revolt. Key administrative factors include the following:

- **Centralised Control:** The British centralised power in their hands, reducing the influence of local rulers and chiefs, which led to resentment from traditional elites.
- **Land Revenue System in British India:** The British implemented exploitative land revenue systems like the **Permanent Settlement** and Ryotwari system, which burdened the peasants with heavy taxes, resulting in widespread economic distress.
- **Cultural Insensitivity:** British laws and policies were seen as disrespectful to Indian culture and customs, such as the attempt to impose Western education and legal systems, which alienated the Indian population.
- **Military Discontent:** The recruitment policies, poor treatment, and lack of promotions for Indian soldiers within the British army led to widespread dissatisfaction.

Immediate Cause of Revolt of 1857

The immediate cause of the Revolt of 1857 was the introduction of the **Enfield Rifle** and its accompanying **greased cartridges**, which were rumoured to be coated with animal fat, specifically from cows and pigs. This led to widespread anger among Hindu and Muslim soldiers who felt their religious beliefs were being violated. The refusal to use these cartridges sparked a rebellion among the sepoys, particularly in Meerut, which quickly spread to other parts of India, triggering the revolt.

Revolt of 1857 Timeline

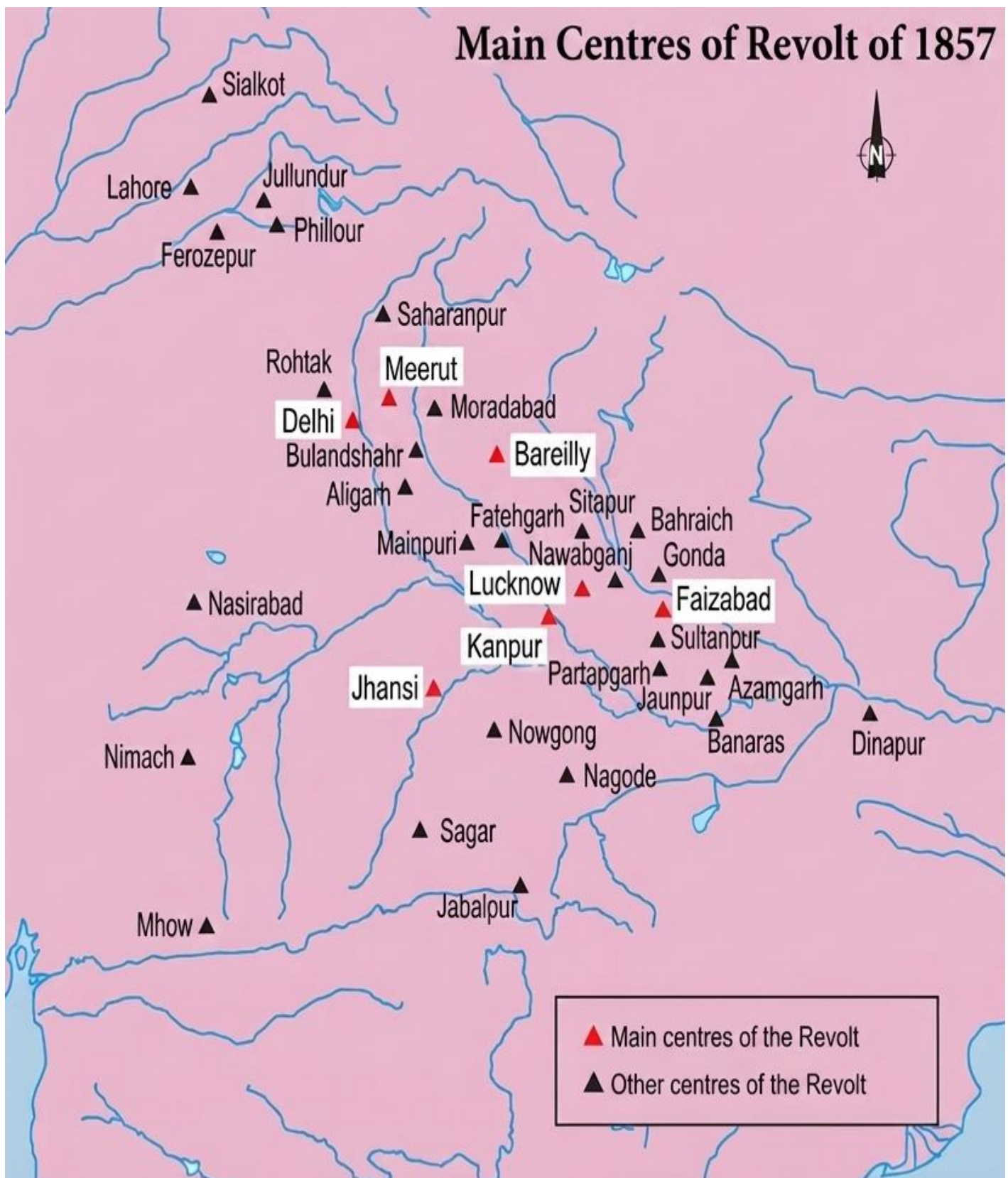
The **Revolt of 1857 started from** the garrison town of Meerut (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) on May 10, 1857. It began as a mutiny by Indian soldiers (sepoys) of the British East India Company's army before spreading into a wider civilian rebellion. The timeline of the revolt of 1857 includes the following:

Date	Event
29th March 1857	Mangal Pandey's Revolt: Mangal Pandey, stationed at Barrackpore , revolts against British officers and is hanged.
24th April 1857	Meerut Revolt: Ninety sepoys of the Third Native Cavalry refuse to use greased cartridges, leading to their dismissal.
9th May 1857	Imprisonment of Sepoys: 85 sepoys are sentenced to imprisonment, fueling unrest in the army.
10th May 1857	Revolt in Meerut: The sepoys in Meerut revolt and march towards Delhi, freeing their comrades and killing British officers.
May 1857	March to Delhi: The sepoys, along with civilians, march towards Delhi, declaring Bahadur Shah II as Emperor.
June 1857	Nana Saheb's Leadership: Nana Saheb leads the revolt in Kanpur, capturing British officers and declaring himself as the Peshwa.
June - July 1857	Lucknow and Cawnpore: The revolt spreads across North India, with major uprisings in Lucknow and Cawnpore.
August 1857	Gwalior: Jhansi Rani Lakshmibai and Tatya Tope attempt to capture Gwalior from the British.
September 1857	Delhi Siege: The British begin a siege of Delhi, aiming to regain control after the sepoy-led rebellion.

March 1858	Revolt Suppressed: The British, under General Havelock, retake Cawnpore, and the revolt is crushed in most regions.
1858	End of Revolt: The British officially suppress the revolt, and the East India Company is replaced by direct British rule.

Revolt of 1857 Main Centres Map

The main centres of the revolt of 1857 across northern and central India include Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow. These sites became the major epicentres of anti-colonial resistance spanning northern and central India.



Revolt of 1857 Leaders

The leaders of Revolt of 1857 played a crucial role in organising resistance against British rule, mobilising local support across regions, and inspiring India's first large-scale uprising for independence in 1857. Even though they acknowledged Emperor Bahadur Shah's suzerainty, all of these locations decided their own rulers and continued to

be independent.

Leader	Contribution
Bakht Khan (Delhi)	Assumed real power in Delhi after arriving from Bareilly; formed a Court of soldiers (Hindus & Muslims).
Begum Hazrat Mahal (Lucknow)	Proclaimed her son as Nawab of Awadh; key leadership alongside Maulavi Ahmadullah, a popular rebel leader.
Rani Lakshmi Bai (Jhansi)	Led Bundelkhand rebels; fought valiantly against Hugh Rose's forces; allied with Tatya Tope to reclaim Gwalior.
Nana Saheb (Kanpur)	Led Kanpur uprising; defeated British under Hugh Wheeler; declared himself Peshwa after expelling British.
Kunwar Singh (Bihar)	Led rebellions across Bihar and central India; defeated British at Arrah; died from injuries in 1858.
Tatya Tope (Kanpur & Gwalior)	Renowned for guerrilla tactics; captured Kanpur for Nana Saheb; retreated to Gwalior after Kanpur's fall.

Revolt of 1857 British Leaders

British leaders of the Revolt of 1857 were headed by **Lord Canning**, the Governor-General of India, who managed the overall political and strategic response.

- **John Nicholson (Delhi):** He led the vital assault to recapture Delhi from rebel forces before being fatally wounded.
- **Henry Lawrence (Lucknow):** He managed the early defense of the Lucknow Residency until his death during the siege.
- **Sir Colin Campbell (Lucknow & Kanpur):** He served as Commander-in-Chief and played a central role in relieving Lucknow and recapturing Kanpur.
- **James Outram & Henry Havelock (Lucknow):** They spearheaded the early military relief operations in Lucknow before Campbell's arrival.
- **General Hugh Rose (Jhansi & Gwalior):** He commanded the Central India Field Force that defeated key rebel leaders Rani Laxmibai and Tantia Tope.

Revolt of 1857 Features

The Revolt of 1857, also known as the First War of Indian Independence, was a watershed event that marked the beginning of organised resistance against British colonial rule in India. It was a turning point in the history of the Indian subcontinent, with far-reaching political, social, and military consequences. The following features characterise the revolt and its impact on India's history:

- **Resistance to British Policies in India:** The revolt was driven by a mix of grievances, including the annexation policies (Doctrine of Lapse), heavy taxation, cultural insensitivity, religious interference, and the introduction of controversial military practices like the greased cartridge.
- **Geographic Spread:** The revolt spread across large parts of northern, central, and western India, including cities like Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, and Meerut. However, it did not gain momentum in southern and eastern India.
- **Diverse Participation:** The uprising saw participation from a broad cross-section of Indian society, including soldiers (sepoys), peasants, artisans, zamindars, and even rulers like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Nana Saheb.
- **Religious and Social Unity:** The revolt witnessed Hindu-Muslim unity, with both communities joining forces to oppose British rule. Bahadur Shah II, a Mughal ruler, was declared the symbolic leader, highlighting a sense of collective Indian identity.
- **Military Mutiny and Civil Uprising:** While it began as a military mutiny of sepoy in the British East India Company's army, it quickly turned into a widespread civilian uprising, with towns and villages across India participating.

Revolt of 1857 Nature

The nature of the Revolt of 1857 is viewed by historians as a complex mix of a military mutiny, a civil rebellion, and a restorative struggle. Views range from a localised Sepoy mutiny or a restorative struggle to a feudal reaction or India's first major war of independence.

- **British View (Sir John Seeley):** A selfish military mutiny with no popular support, national spirit, or leadership.
- **Nationalist View (V.D. Savarkar, S.B. Chaudhuri):** A planned "First War of Independence" fought for self-rule (*swaraj*) and religious identity (*swadharma*).
- **Marxist View (M.N. Roy, R.P. Dutt):** A peasant-led uprising and a final stand by traditional feudal leaders against foreign commercial capitalism.
- **Modern Consensus (Thomas Metcalf, C.A. Bayly):** More than a simple mutiny, but less than a fully unified national revolt—united by a common anti-British stance, despite varying local motives.

Revolt of 1857 Reasons for Failure

The failure of the 1857 Revolt stemmed from key internal weaknesses like a lack of unity, inadequate leadership, and limited societal support. Additionally, brutal British suppression, characterised by mass executions, torture, and widespread destruction of towns, crushed the rebellion despite fuelling deep Indian resentment.

- **Lack of Unified Programme and Ideology:** The rebellion lacked a clear agenda for governance, focusing solely on British rule's overthrow, leading to disarray and a lack of coordinated efforts.

- **Lack of Unity Among Indians:** The revolt was not widespread, with regions like Punjab and the south remaining loyal to the British. Additionally, differing local interests led to divisions between Hindus and Muslims.
- **Absence of Support from Educated Indians:** The educated class did not support the revolt, seeing it as regressive and believing that British rule was necessary for modernisation.
- **Military Superiority of the British:** The British forces were technologically advanced and better organised, with superior artillery and support from Indian rulers, ensuring their victory.
- **Weak Leadership and Coordination:** The revolt lacked centralised leadership and coordination, as regional leaders like Rani Lakshmibai and Nana Saheb did not unite under a single command.
- **Limited Support from Indian Princes and Chiefs:** Many Indian rulers sided with the British, weakening the revolt, as some had a vested interest in maintaining British rule.
- **Use of Brutal Tactics by the British:** The British responded with extreme force, using reprisals, executions, and heavy punishments, which discouraged further uprisings and quelled the rebellion.

Revolt of 1857 Consequences

The Revolt of 1857 had far-reaching consequences that reshaped India's political and social landscape. Key impacts included reforms in military organisation, a shift in political governance, and the implementation of a "divide and rule" policy.

- **Changes in Military Organisation:** The British increased the number of European soldiers and restructured Indian regiments to prevent unity among soldiers. Regiments were organised based on caste, community, and region to suppress nationalism.
- **Transfer of Power:** The governance of India shifted from the East India Company to the British Crown through the **Government of India Act of 1858**. A Secretary of State for India, supported by a Council, took charge.
- **Divide and Rule:** The British deepened divisions among Indians, especially by discriminating against Muslims in public appointments, which later led to communal tensions and hindered the freedom struggle.
- **New Policy towards Princely States:** The policy of annexation was replaced, allowing princely rulers to adopt heirs, restoring some autonomy to local rulers.

Revolt of 1857 Significance

The significance of the revolt of 1857 lies in its role as a pivotal turning point in Indian history, marking the end of East India Company rule and establishing an enduring anti-colonial legacy.

- **Political & Administrative Changes:** Power was transferred to the British Crown via the Government of India Act 1858, replacing the Governor-General with a Viceroy and ending territorial annexations.
- **Rise of Nationalism:** It served as a vital anti-colonial symbol where diverse groups fought together, with **important leaders of the Revolt of 1857** like Rani Laxmi Bai inspiring later freedom struggles.
- **Hindu-Muslim Unity:** It demonstrated remarkable cooperation between Hindus and Muslims across all levels—among the general populace, soldiers, and leadership.

- **Military & Policy Shifts:** The British reorganised the army, applied "divide and rule" recruitment policies, and stopped interfering in local social-religious customs.
- **Global Impact:** The uprising gained international attention and was actively analysed abroad by figures like Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli.

Revolt of 1857 UPSC PYQs

Question 1: The Revolt of 1857 was the culmination of the recurrent big and small local rebellions that had occurred in the preceding hundred years of British rule. **(UPSC Mains 2019)**

Question 2: Explain how the Uprising of 1857 constitutes an important watershed in the evolution of British policies towards colonial India. **(UPSC Mains 2016)**

Q3: What was/were the object/objects of Queen Victoria's Proclamation (1858)? **(UPSC Prelims 2016)**

1. To disclaim any intention to annex Indian States.
2. To place the Indian administration under the British Crown.
3. To regulate East India Company's trade with India.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (a)

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