

1857

A Pictorial Presentation



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION



Sepoys of Bengal Army

1857

A PICTORIAL PRESENTATION



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
Ministry of Information & Broadcasting
Government of India

PREFACE

THIS ALBUM has been planned to present a pictorial account of the Indian struggle of 1857 on the occasion of its centenary celebrations. It contains portraits of the Indian leaders of the revolt and sketches and pictures of important places and significant incidents connected with it. In the selection of material for the album an attempt has been made to obtain, as far as possible, contemporary sketches and drawings. In a few cases where contemporary materials were either not available or were unsuitable for reproduction, modern photographs have been used. Authenticity of the sketches has been another criterion in the selection.

The task of obtaining material suitable from the Indian point of view has been rather difficult. Illustrative material on the subject is mostly available in the works of British writers and artists. There are hardly any contemporary portraits or sketches made by Indian artists. It is fortunate that British artists, many of whom were in the thick of fighting, have left us their impressions of 1857-58 in pictures and sketches; but for them there would not have been any pictorial record of some of the historic events of those years. Their drawings, naturally, are not in keeping with the Indian sentiments. They shared the feelings of the other British residents of the time and their productions extol the deeds of the British, and the Indian people are often treated with derision. However, in the works of these contemporary artists we get authentic impressions of many places of significance in the struggle as well as certain incidents. The sketches were quite often prepared on the spot and in the midst of fighting.

It may also be pointed out that it is difficult to get authentic portraits of many of the Indian leaders of the revolt whereas a large number of portraits of British generals and statesmen of the period are available. It has been impossible to obtain a true likeness of even the Rani of Jhansi. Her available portraits are works of modern artists and do not conform to contemporary accounts of the Rani. Many of

the main characters have not been preserved on canvas at all and outstanding leaders like Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, Shahzada Firuz Shah and Rana Beni Madho are absent from the album for this reason. Some of the important places connected with the struggle have also gone unrepresented. However, no effort has been spared to make the collection as representative as possible.

The illustrations have been arranged so as to tell a story. Notes have been added to the captions to help in the proper appreciation of the pictures. The introduction contains a short and simple account of the struggle; the details of the fighting have been omitted.

This publication owes much to the help and co-operation of many. Dr. S.N. Sen, the author of *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, gave advice regarding its scope and the collection of material for it. Dr. Bisheshwar Prasad, Professor of History, University of Delhi, helped in the final selection of the pictures, and Dr. P. Saran of Delhi University read the manuscript of notes and the introduction and made valuable suggestions. Dr. V.G. Dighe, Research Officer, Ministry of External Affairs, translated the letter of Rani of Jhansi, the *facsimile* of which appears on page 61. The work of collection of material and its final presentation was done by Shri V.C. Joshi of the National Archives of India.

For access to the material included in this publication we are indebted to many libraries, museums and other institutions in India and the United Kingdom. We would like, in particular, to record our appreciation for the facilities afforded to us by the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the National Library, Calcutta, the Amir-ud-daula Public Library, Lucknow, and the United Services Institute, New Delhi. Our thanks are also due to the Governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar for the co-operation they have extended us. We are grateful to the publishers of old books from which many of the illustrations have been drawn.

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INTRODUCTION

THE RISING of 1857 was an important landmark in the history of India. It marked the beginning of the country's struggle for freedom after a century of uninterrupted foreign domination. The violent outbreak of the Sepoys at Meerut on the evening of 10 May was not a mutiny similar to those which had occurred earlier in the British Indian Army to ventilate certain local grievances of the soldiers. It did not remain an isolated incident. The rebellion soon spread beyond the Bengal Army and assumed the character of a general revolt, which was enthusiastically joined by the civil population of Hindustan. The country witnessed a popular upsurge of deep-seated and widespread bitterness against the alien rulers. The East India Company's Government was swept from large parts of North India and the very foundations of British rule were shaken. It appeared for some time that the Company's *Raj* had disappeared from the land.

What was the cause of this great convulsion? Some historians attribute it to the 'greased cartridge'. But it is unbelievable that such a vast and popular uprising could have been brought about merely by the new cartridge, howsoever offensive it might have been to the Sepoys. It was the immediate cause, the spark that set ablaze the smouldering fire of discontent. The basic causes of the revolt were complex, embracing all aspects of the impact of alien rule on Indian polity and society.

Ever since the battle of Plassey (June 1757) the Company's territorial power had been growing very fast. By 1818, when the last Peshwa was dethroned, practically all the Indian States had either been annexed or had entered into treaty alliances with the Company on humiliating conditions. The British had become the suzerain power and the Indian princes were mere puppets in their hands.

The policy of expansion did not stop there and the few independent principalities on the frontiers were also annexed whenever an opportunity presented itself. In 1843, Sind was attacked and added to the British dominion; it was an act of wanton aggression

to cover the terrible disaster which the British armies had suffered in the Afghan war. The revolt of Diwan Mulraj of Multan was used as a pretext for the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. The rights of the minor Maharaja, Dalip Singh, who was under the protection of the British, were set aside. Lord Dalhousie annexed States whenever an occasion arose and often in disregard of solemn engagements. Under his 'Doctrine of Lapse' the princes were denied the long-cherished right of adoption; in this way Dalhousie annexed the Maratha States of Satara, Nagpur and Jhansi and several minor principalities. On the death of the ex-Peshwa, Baji Rao II, the pension granted to him was abolished and the claims of his adopted son, Nana Dhondu Pant, were disregarded. In 1856, the kingdom of Oudh was annexed. The Nawabs had been the faithful allies of the Company for a long time; but such considerations did not weigh much with Dalhousie, who had a calculated plan to abolish all the Indian States.

The result of his policy was that no Indian prince felt secure, and there was widespread resentment. The annexations also caused discontent among the subjects of the dispossessed princes, as they were bound to them by old ties of tradition. For an Englishman like Dalhousie it was not possible to realize that the people had genuine respect for old dynasties and that they might prefer the old tyranny to the oppression of the new rulers.

The ever widening frontiers of the Company's dominion also resulted in the shutting out of Indians from all avenues of honourable employment. The administrative reforms of Cornwallis, introduced at the close of the 18th century, meant the virtual exclusion of Indians from high posts. The administration assumed an English character. There was perhaps no other case of foreign rule in which the people were "so completely excluded from all share of the government of the country as in British India". To make matters worse, the English administrators gradually became arrogant and there was a wide gulf between them and the people. They could hardly know the feelings of the vast multitude, which providence had placed under their rule.

This lack of understanding of the feelings of the people is nowhere better illustrated than in the agrarian changes which were introduced in the first half of the 19th century, particularly in the North-Western Province. In the settlement of this province, many landowners were deprived of their lands as they failed to establish their proprietary rights by documentary proof. Investigations were even made into the titles of those who had held estates for many generations before the advent of the Company's rule. At the same time enquiries were held in regard to rent-free tenures. Many failed to satisfy the authorities in regard to the original validity of their titles and their tenures were resumed to augment the Government's revenue. Similarly, in the Bombay Presidency the Inam Commission carried out investigations into a large number of titles to land and many estates were abolished on the failure of the Jagirdars to produce satisfactory documentary evidence in support of their claims.

The landed aristocracy was alienated by these ill-conceived measures. Further bitterness was aroused by the working of the Sale Law and excessive taxation which ruined the landlord and peasant alike. Under the old system land was inalienable, but now it could be sold in default of payment of rent. In the auctions the estates of many land owners were acquired by money-lenders, whose power was growing under the new system but who were total strangers to the rural population. As a result of this 'agrarian revolution' village communities were broken up. The landlords were not merely deprived of their estates but of all hope of honourable employment. The peasants did not benefit under the new dispensation and were equally aggrieved. Ideas of individual rights and personal freedom did not occur to them and they were opposed to changes in traditional socio-economic relations. The British administrators failed to realize that there was a traditional bond between the *talukdars* and their retainers and they all blamed the alien rulers for their impoverishment. When the revolt broke out the rural population, naturally, swelled the ranks of the rebels.

Economic distress was also caused in another way by the policies of the Government. The political authority which the Company wielded was employed to serve its commercial interests for many years. Indian handicrafts were ruined as a result of its oppressive policy and the loss of patronage caused by the dissolution of the

princely states. The adverse effects of the Industrial Revolution on the Indian economy were also being felt. These factors naturally added to the rising wave of discontent in the country.

The British were different from the Indian people in race, religion, habits, ideas and sentiments. In the 18th century they exhibited a friendly attitude towards Indian society and religions. They had no particular zeal for their own religion and the Company even acted as trustees of some Hindu temples. Missionary activity was discouraged. In the 19th century this attitude underwent a radical change and the British began to interfere with the religious and social usages of the people. Some of the social reforms were indeed introduced with lofty motives, to put an end to evil customs and to ameliorate the condition of the people; but the feelings of those whom the reforms affected were not taken into consideration. The result was that even the abolition of *Sati* (1829) was not welcomed by the mass of the people. When this evil custom had been banned more than 250 years earlier by Akbar there was no such feeling of resentment on the part of his Hindu subjects. But in the 19th century people looked on the foreign Government with suspicion and they feared that their ancestral faith and caste were in peril. Their fears were undoubtedly based on their own observations. After 1813 there was a definite increase both in the numbers and proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries, whose avowed object was to convert people to their faith. Missionaries were to be seen everywhere—in bazars, schools, hospitals and even prisons. They ridiculed in public the tenets of Hinduism and Islam. The teaching of the Bible was introduced in some Government schools, and orphans and victims of calamities were often converted to Christianity. The missionaries received support and patronage from highly placed Government officials and the people naturally believed that the Government was in collusion with them to eradicate their caste and convert them to Christianity. The passing of Act XXI of 1850, which enabled converts to inherit ancestral property, confirmed this belief; the new law was naturally interpreted as a concession to Christian converts. Another unpopular act was the one of 1856, permitting Hindu widows to remarry. This was a salutary reform, but according to the sentiments of those days the people apprehended that their religion and society were in imminent danger.

The princes lived in an atmosphere of insecurity, the landed aristocracy had been alienated and the mass of the people were disaffected; but their antagonism would not have led to a serious insurrection so long as the Sepoy Army remained loyal. The Sepoys of the Bengal Army were mostly men of high caste from Oudh and the North-Western Province; they shared the general apprehensions regarding the Government's intentions. The Sepoys had won many wars for the Company. They had fought for their masters with unflinching devotion in the most difficult and perilous circumstances. In spite of this, they did not get a fair deal. Their emoluments were very low in comparison with those of the British soldiers and their chances of promotion negligible. They also had grievances regarding the payment of extra allowances for service in newly conquered territories, like Sind, which were foreign lands to them. The Sepoy's trust in the Government was fast waning. Their bitterness against the foreign masters was intensified by the arrogant attitude of their European officers, and the fellow feeling between Sepoys and officers which had once existed in the Company's Army was a thing of the past. The loyalty of the Sepoys was further undermined by certain military reforms which outraged their religious feelings. They had an aversion to overseas service, as travel across the seas meant loss of caste for them. Their feelings had previously been respected in this matter; but in accordance with the new enlistment regulations issued in July 1856 overseas service was made obligatory on all new recruits. The Sepoys construed this as another attack on their caste and religion; their loyalty was severely shaken.

While the country was thus seething with discontent and the Sepoys, too, were agitated, the affair of the greased cartridge came up. One day in January 1857 a rumour went round at Calcutta that the new cartridges to be used in the Enfield Rifle, recently introduced in India, were greased with cow's fat and lard and that this had been done to defile both the Hindu and Mulim Sepoys who would use the cartridges. There was reason to believe that the grease used was of an offensive nature, and the news soon spread to all the military stations. This roused a storm of indignation and kindled the embers of discontent. The introduction of the cartridges hastened the revolt which had long been brewing.

The authorities soon discovered their error and attempted to allay

the feelings of the Sepoys, which had been roused by their ill-conceived measure. Orders were issued that the new cartridges should not be issued to the Indian regiments and the drill was changed so that the cartridges need not be bitten. But it was too late. Once the suspicions of the Sepoys were aroused it was not possible to soothe them. They were not satisfied even when they were told to grease their cartridges themselves.

The rising wave of discontent manifested itself in several cases of incendiarism at Barrackpur and several other military stations. On 26 February the 19th Native Infantry at Berhampur refused to accept the cartridges given to them. The authorities decided to disband the regiment as a warning to others. Then on 29 March Mangal Pande, a sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry at Barrackpur, attacked the Adjutant of his regiment. His action was a result of the fear in the Sepoy's minds regarding loss of their caste and religion. Mangal Pande was executed after a court-martial; but the trouble which had started could not be stopped by such measures. He was not a felon or a criminal in the eyes of his fellow Sepoys; he was regarded a martyr in the cause of his religion.

On 24 April Colonel Smyth of the 3rd Native Cavalry at Meerut called to parade ninety selected sowars of his regiment to demonstrate how they could load their rifles without biting the cartridges. When the cartridges were issued, eighty-five of the sowars refused to accept them. The cartridges were of old pattern, but the Sepoys could not be persuaded to handle even the material which they had used on previous occasions. The offenders were tried by court-martial and sentenced to imprisonment. On 9 May the men were stripped of their uniforms and put in fetters in the presence of the whole brigade and sent to prison. This humiliation drove their Sepoy brethren to frenzy. The following evening, the standard of rebellion was raised. The station was taken by surprise. Led by the sowars of the 3rd Cavalry, the Sepoys broke open the prison and released their comrades, shot many of their British officers and set their bungalows on fire. Chaos followed in the city and there was indiscriminate plunder and killing.

The Sepoys had risen without any plan; but they did not stay very long at Meerut. The majority of them took the road to Delhi, forty