

WAR OF 1857: ACHIEVEMENTS OF INDIANS IN THEIR STRUGGLE AGAINST BRITISH

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Abstract

The war of 1857 was a great event that influenced the future course of history of sub-continent. The war has been a topic of academic discourse for historians and social scientists across the world. Today it has been more than 150 years and this war still attracts researchers for their study. There are several dimensions of this war, such as the causes of the war, events that took place during the war, the people who supported British and those who fought against British, results and consequences. In terms of results many scholars are of the opinion that this war was a failure for those who initiated it. It is generally believed that the section of population of India who fought this war against British authority were unable to achieve their objectives. The war also resulted in many benefits for Indian however these achievements get overshadowed by the debate about the failure. This research effort highlights the achievements of the war for India and the value of them was also extraordinary.

Keywords: war, achievement, failure, consequences, British East India Company

Introduction

A lot has been written and said about the war of independence. The causes of the war which brought Sub-Continent to a new era are various and well known. Many scholars are of the idea that the war was the outcome of the rude and ignorant attitude of British East India Company, other writers still believe that it was fought for self-interests of some local rulers of Sub-Continent rather than the larger goal of liberating whole of India from the rule of foreigners. In India holistic and collective approach as Indians had not arisen till then. It was much later in last quarter of 19th century Indian national patriotism started to take place of regionalism.

The reasons for which the war was lost by numerous Indians against some foreigners are reprehensible and well discussed. The population of Sub-Continent was much greater than the British officers present in it. A layman cannot understand that how such a small number of foreigners were able to defeat a large population such as India in a war for Independence. The detail study shows the core reasons behind the defeat which in general display the weakness of Indians rather than the strengths of foreigners. The outcomes of the war have been also discussed at length and have been seen by and large as sufferings by historians. Generally it is accepted that the war of independence was a futile exercise, which only brought further difficulties to the people of Sub-Continent.

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“The Great Rebellion of 1857 or what was supposed to be a ‘sepoy mutiny’ has undoubtedly been a major landmark in colonial South Asian history. Besides posing what was undoubtedly the most serious military challenge to the might of British colonialism over the nineteenth century, its vibrations and memories lasted much longer than had been expected by those carrying out the colonial counter-insurgency operations” (Pati, 2010, p. 1)

Literature Review

The war was not caused by any particular incident at a particular point. It had long term causes affecting the mind of common people from different walks of life. Even at the time of the war the previous incidents were playing a role in the minds of the fighter in terms of their conduct (Jones, 2007).

War on 1857 was an event of gigantic proportions. The status of Indian had changed after the event. Earlier Indians were not allowed to participate in local administration and under Lord Ripon (Viceroy of India, 1880-1884) local self-government was introduced in which Indians were taking part (Nanda, 2003). Other than the administrative reforms British Raj introduced many constitutional and legal reforms like ‘Act for better Government of India 1858’. This in fact was the first major step towards legal reforms and fulfilled the long last need for taking up responsibility by the colonial administrators (Nanda, 2003).

Different acts were introduced as after math of the War. Some of them were brought in to accommodate British needs but they took the Indian perspective in view compared to the pre-war era. Some of the Acts were introduced on the demands of Indian political parties, however they may not have fulfilled all the demands but they incorporated some of the demands (Qureshi, 1985).

Indians before the war did not have a sense of Indian nationalism. They were indulged in regional, ethnic and religious identities than national. After the war Indians for the first time started to understand politics and develop sense of Indian patriotism than their segregated identities. They also started to establish political parties and launch movement on national and regional scales (Darraj: 2011).

Research methodology

The research is conducted on the lines of qualitative research methods. Original historical documents were consulted for better understanding of the facts. The secondary sources related to the topic range very widely over 150 years. Text belonging to different decades has been included to incorporate different point of views. The topic under discussion is tripartite, e.g. Muslims, Hindus and British, therefore it becomes imperative to include point of views of writers belonging to all the mentioned groups to maintain impartiality. To prove the hypothesis inductive approach has been adopted.

Rationale

We can articulate that the war of 1857 was a failure because it was unable to achieve the goals for which it was fought. For example to drive British out of India, to unite Indians and restore Mughal rule. However it was not a complete failure. Through the war the people were able to bring positive changes.

Not much praise has been given to the pains of the fighters who laid their lives for their country and countrymen. It was the first time in the history of Sub-Continent that people of India fought together with out bearing in mind the racial and religious differences at their will and there were those as well who did not chose to fight. There is another debate regarding who was loyal to the country and who was against it. For example the people who were against British or those who were supporting them. A glance at the causes reflects upon the intentions of different people participating and not participating in the war. “Whatever the immediate cause of Mangal Pande’s behhaviour, there is no doubt that two factors were playing on his mind, as on the minds of his comrades. Their commandant, Colonel Wheler had deliberately lied to his men when he told them that the rumour about converting the sepoys to Christianity was false. By his own admission Wheler himself was actively proselytizing his faith, and moreover considered it his Christian duty to do so. Secondly, the arrival of fifty European soldiers from HM’s 53th Regiment at Barrackpore, in anticipation of the disbandment of the 19th Bengal Native Infantry the next day, could only have fed the sepoys’ fear that another parade ground massacre was due to take place, like the one in 1824. Mangal Pande was no young recruit in March 1857, but seasoned soldier aged twenty-six, who had joined the army seven years earlier and whose previous general character was described as good” (Jones, 2007, pp.36-37).

With the total domination of North West India till the banks of river Indus by EIC by 1849 it became inevitable to prevent a war (Roy, 2013). They had acquired such a large area that it had become impossible to firmly control. Bengal had the largest contingent in Indian troops of British Army at the time, (Roy, 2013) (mainly because it was the first area EIC established as their presidency and it had the largest population in all Indian provinces).

Achievements

British East India Company abolished

One major out come of the war was that it brought an end to the suppressive rule of the British East India Company in 1858. If we do not consider other results only this outcome of the war was a great achievement in itself. “Sayyid Ahmad heartily welcomed the return of peace. The assumption of the company dominions by the Crown directly linked the destinies of India with those of Britain. This he considered to be the luckiest event in the history of the two countries” (Hamid, 1971, p.1).

The Company which landed in Calicut in 1608 grew like a living organism and extended its control to most of the parts of India till 1857. Following Battle of Plassey in 1757 the Company established its administration in Bengal following that the Company never looked back and other territories like Owadh, Sind, Punjab, Delhi, Madras etc faced the

same fate as Bengal. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan immediately wrote Causes of Indian Revolt in 1858 in which he criticized the Company and blamed the war on it. "With a firm sociological background it criticized the Company rule very strongly and showed that the revolt was an outcome of the frustrations and accumulated wrongs of decades" (Hamid, 1971, p.2).

John Bright a member parliament was very critical of the affairs of the BEIC. He was very vocal about it as well. In his speech on June 24, 1858, he framed four charges against company, "(1) 'the industry of the people of India had been grievously neglected'; , (2) 'that there was great reason for complaint with respect to the administration of justice'; (3) 'that with regard to the wars entered into by the Indian government there was much of which the people of England had reason to be ashamed'; (4) ' that there was also a general impression that the expenditure of the East Indian government was excessive; and that it had been proved before more than one committee that the taxes imposed upon the people of India were onerous to the last degree.'" (Merne: 1922, p.17)

A detailed study of the 100 year rule of company brings out the horrors which the people of Sub-Continent faced. Other than the religious and social persecutions the people of India suffered most economically. The company which had only one concern with the Sub-continent, profit, economically suffocated the local people in all fields of life for their own benefit. After the war although economical chains were not completely shattered but there was surely relieves. Many lands which have been confiscated by the company through different law and treaties were returned to their earlier claimants. In addition to that Indians were given more opportunities in the services which brought down the level of frustration in the hearts of the people and also provided economic relieves. "The Viceroyalty of Canning (1858-1862) was also marked by the withdrawal of the Doctrine of Lapse and the foundation of three Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras". (Ali, 1987, p.139)

Legal Status for the people of India

Before the war and during the rule of the Company the people of India had no status. India was recognized as an official colony of Britain in 1858. People of India were not enjoying any legal status because British East India Company was administering the country for their own goals, not for the development or welfare of local people. They did not give any representation to Indian in terms of making laws for India. After the war people of India which had no status during the rule of the company got the status of citizen in the proclamation of 1858. "There was complete reorganization of the internal administration. In fact, British were more influenced than the Indians by this epoch making event" (Nanda, 2003, p.203)

The history suggests that for the company the people of India were just a hurdle in the path of economic profits which they tried to overcome through different laws. The laws which were passed during the company rule ignored the welfare of the people, their social fabric and religious believes.

“The most important result of Mutiny was the Act for the better Government of India 1858. This act was, in fact, the termination of a process commenced by the Pitts India Act in 1784” (Nanda, 2003, p.203). After the war of 1857 India witnessed a series of reforms in which Indians were given more and more rights. The proclamation of 1858 was the first of the series which almost predicted the future reforms and set the directions for them.

“The Queen who had rejected the first proclamation submitted to her and requested that the revised draft, ‘should breathe feelings of generosity, benevolent and religious toleration’, disclaimed as the company had so often done, all desire for an extension of territory, promised to respect ‘the rights, dignity, and honor of native Prince and to uphold religious toleration and declared it to be her will ‘that so far as many and impartially admitted to offices in our services the duties of which may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity, duly to discharge’” (Roberts, 1952, pp.383-384).

The introduction of Indian Councils Act 1861 was a giant leap forward. In it for the first time Indians were included in the Legislature. The central legislature was enlarged. “This was another great achievement of the reign of Canning in India” (Chhabra, 1985, p.273).

India saw many further reforms which brought further relieve to Indian people. “The introduction of local self government was an immortal work of Lord Ripon. The chief aim behind the introduction of the local self government was to train the Indians properly in the art of government with a view to enabling them to shoulder the responsibility of the administration of India in future. Before Lord Ripon, Indians were not allowed to take part in the administration in any way” (Nanda, 2003, p.220). These reforms contributed towards the confidence of Indians during 1880’s. It also brought an understanding of politics for the people. People like Ameer Ali came forward to become an example in front of other who on the basis of his ability became an important part of British machinery. Later many others followed his footprints and served their country.

End of armed struggle and advent of Politics

British came to India in 1608 (First British ship Landed in India in 1608 in Calicut and they were refused to trade in India by Emperor Jehangir. Later they were permitted to trade in the Province of Gujarat under the governorship of Prince Khurram). Since then they played the role of traders in India until 1757 (Conquest of Bengal in battle of Plassey in which British defeated Nawab Siraj Udaula of Bengal). For next hundred years until 1857 BEIC became indulged in politics and administration of India. It was during this century long suppressive rule that many Indians across India took arms against British. For example, 1757 Bengal, 1763 Battle of Buxar in which Shuja ud Daula of Awadh, Mir Qasim of Bengal and Shah Alam II, Mughal king confronted British, 1770’s Hyder Ali in Mysore, 1780’s Tipu in Mysore, 1830’s Ranjeet Singh in Punjab and Sindh 1843 etc. Throughout this period thousands of Indians died on both sides because the foot soldiers of BEIC were Indians.

1857 marked the end of the continuous violence and bloodshed. After the war as discussed earlier the BEIC was replaced with direct British rule. From 1857 till 1947 Indian achieved freedom and Pakistan was created no battle of the scale of previous examples was fought. Though there were some political movements which turned violent for the time being. With educational reforms introduced by British after the war a new breed of Indians emerged in the form of Jinnah, Iqbal, Nehru, Tilak, Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Hasrat Mohani, Gnadhi, Abul Kalam Azad, Shaukat Ali, etc., were capable of fighting political and constitutional battle against British.

The formation of Congress in 1885 was not an insignificant event. It brought a dimension in the History of Sub-Continent. Although at the start it was working for developing better relations between the ruler and the ruled but as time passed we saw that the same Congress was able to thrust British out of their boundaries through a political movement. This political activity later compelled Muslims for the formation of Muslim League in 1906. The League as the History proved led Muslims to achieve what no other nation has been able to achieve, to get a land on the basis of ideology (Israel is another example but it was supported by the Western powers). The Congress and League brought constitutional methods for the solutions of the problems faced by Indians. The newly western educated Indians changed the face of struggle against foreign occupation in India. Now the people of India were not looking to solve their problems by lance or bullet but through ideas and dialogue.

Sequence of Reforms

In 1858 the first major outcome was the “Government of India: An act for better Government of India” was presented on 2nd August 1858. This was an act which gave Indian people the legal status of colonial subject. It may not sound well however it was better than having no status during. “From then on, the governance of India was often reviewed and the UK Parliament passed a total of 196 Local, Private and Public Acts regarding India and Indian matters during the years between 1858 and 1947” (Parliament UK). Most of them gave a bit more autonomy and liberty to Indian people than the previous law, leading finally towards independence.

The language and intent of the proclamation of Queen Victoria, which was published by the Governor General on November 1st 1858 in Allahabad was comforting. She apologized for the rule of EIC and made promises for treating Indians as equals. “We deeply lament the evils and misery which have been brought upon India by the acts of ambitious Men, who have deceived their Countrymen, by false reports, and led them into open Rebellion” (Godley, 1908).

She firmly pledged to Indians not to wage expansion wars within India. “We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions; and while we will permit no aggression upon our dominions or our rights, to be attempted with impunity, we shall sanction no encroachment on those of others. We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of native princes as our own; and we desire that they as well as our own subjects, should enjoy that prosperity and that social advancement which can only be secured by internal peace and good government” (Godley, 1908).

One, major discrimination, during the time of EIC was the opportunity to work under the company. High posts were only offered to British and locals were not given equal opportunity. In her proclamation Queen announce equal opportunity, "It is our further will that, so far as may be, our subjects, of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified, by their education, ability, and integrity, duly to discharge" (*East India Proclamation, 1858*).

The first step towards introducing Indian representation into legislation was taken in 1861. Along with central legislative council, provincial council were also formed and extended to 'non-official' members. "An attempt was made, therefore, by the Indian Councils Act of 1861 to establish closer contact between government and the governed. The Act provided for the enlargement of the Governor-General's Executive Council to form a Legislative Council, reconstituted and likewise enlarged the Legislative Councils in Madras and Bombay, and provided for the creation of similar Councils in Bengal, the North-Western Provinces and the Punjab; and it prescribed that at least half the new or 'additional' members should in each case be chosen from outside the ranks of the civil service. Since most of the 'non-official' members thus chosen were Indians, the Act of 1861 may be said to have introduced the representative principle into the Indian constitution. But it was by no means a concession of the representative government which Macaulay had so firmly ruled out a generation earlier. The majority in the Councils was still officials, and the small groups of non-official members were nominated by the Governors, not elected. Their powers, moreover, were purely legislative. They could not even ask questions about, still less discuss, executive business. The conduct of administration, including all matters of finance, remained in the exclusive control of the wholly official Executive Councils" (Coupland, 1944, p.21).

The reforms which poured a new life in the politics of Sub-continent were Indian Councils Act 1892. In this act the Indians, which were previously nominated by the Viceroy now were to be elected by the people India. In other sense Indians were introduced to democracy. "The Act also made room for an elective element in the country and thus partly fulfilled the Congress demand. The members were, in theory, nominated by the head of the Government, but regulations were made under the Act by which some of the members were to be filled by representatives of different bodies and interests, such as corporations, municipalities, district boards, associations of land-holders, universities and chambers of commerce. The system was not strictly a system of election, for elective bodies could only recommend their representatives to Head of Government for nominations. In practice, however, nomination was never refused." (Qureshi, 1984, p.821). At this moment Sir Syed expressed his concerns regarding the protection of rights of Muslims. He foresighted the Hindu dominance through this limited form of democracy. His fears were realized after the partition of Bengal in 1905. The agitation of Hindus paved the way for the creation of Muslim League in 1906.

British introduced Morley Minto reforms or Indian Councils Act 1909. These reforms were the most important for Muslims in two ways first the demand of Separate Electorates was officially accepted and secondly British did not reverse the Partition of Bengal. The central and provincial councils were also expanded with the increase of

elected members. “The grant of separate electorates to the Muslims established legally and constitutionally the status of the Muslim community in the Sub-Continent as a distinct entity and that of the Muslim League as the only important Muslim organization” (Qureshi, 1984, p.834).

The Government of India Act 1919 further reduced the number of official members and for the first time the number of elected members was more than the official members. The system of diarchy was also introduced in the provinces and gave limited powers to the elected government in the provinces. By reducing the voters’ qualification more Indians were able to take part in the process of electing their representatives.

This chain of legislative reforms did not stop here. The political parties of India were becoming more and more active and clear about their objectives and methodology. The Congress had asked the full independence on 24th January 1929. The Three Round Table conferences show the extent of the importance of the local political parties for the legislation in India.

Finally the Act of India 1935 fulfilled many demands of Indians generally. Although it was not completely acceptable for all the political parties, it was agreed upon by most with reservations and parties took part in the elections of 1937. The political governments were formed in provinces and provinces were given almost full autonomy in their affairs. This was last achievement before reaching on the final destination, Independence, for the people of India.

Conclusion

The steps like the rolling back of doctrine of lapse, giving the status of citizen to the people of India, inclusion of Indians in the process of legislation etc were some of those outcomes of the war which suggest that the fighters who laid their lives in an attempt to achieve the goals which might not be clear to them as well did not completely fail. We can say that the complete independence of Sub-Continent was a sequence of achievements which was started by the war of 1857 and it was finalized in 1947 in the form of Pakistan and India.

The war of 1857 is a very elusive event in history. Every element of this major event deserves detailed observation. Even the title of this event is difficult to name for example if it is called war of independence then all the Indians who in EIC army and who were supporting British would become traitors. On the other hand if this event is called “Indian revolt of 1857” then all those who fought against British become traitors.

The results or outcomes of this war had been overwhelmingly been termed as defeat or failure. By accepting this version the efforts and sacrifices of all those people who fought against British becomes over shadowed. On the contrary by discussion presented in the research, vividly show that many positive outcomes were visible immediately after the war and some later. Before the war British stayed in India for 250 years from 1608 till 1857 and only manipulated the resources and people of India for their own benefits. However after the war only in 90 years (from 1858 till 1947) they were ousted by Indians who carried the ideology of fighters of 1857 that they will not take dictation from outsiders.

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