

The Sepoy Mutiny / Rebellion

What Was the Indian Revolt of 1857 about?

The immediate cause of the Indian Revolt of 1857 was a seemingly minor change in the weapons used by the British East India Company's troops. The East India Company upgraded to the new Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle, which used greased paper cartridges. In order to open the cartridges and load the rifles, sepoys had to bite into the paper and tear it with their teeth.

Rumors began in 1856 that the grease on the cartridges was made of a mixture of beef and pork lard; eating cows, of course, is forbidden in Hinduism, while consumption of pork is forbidden in Islam. Thus, in this one small change, the British had managed to seriously offend both Hindu and Muslim troops.

The revolt started in Meerut, which was the first area to receive the new weapons. The British manufacturers soon changed the cartridges in an attempt to calm the spreading anger among the sepoys, but this move backfired as well - the fact that they stopped greasing the cartridges only confirmed the rumors about cow and pig fat, in the sepoys' minds.

Causes of Spreading Unrest:

Of course, as the Indian Revolt spread, it took on additional causes of discontent among both sepoy troops and civilians of all castes. Princely families joined the uprising due to British changes to the inheritance law, making adopted children ineligible for their thrones. This was an attempt to control succession in many of the princely states that were nominally independent from the British. Large landholders in northern India also rose up, since the British East India had confiscated land and redistributed it to the peasantry. Peasants were none too happy, either, though - they joined the revolt to protest heavy land taxes imposed by the British.

Religion also prompted some Indians to join the mutiny. The East India Company forbade certain religious practices and traditions, including sati or widow-burning, to the outrage of many Hindus. The company also tried to undermine the caste system, which seemed inherently unfair to post-Enlightenment British sensibilities. In addition, British officers and missionaries began to preach Christianity to the Hindu and Muslim sepoys. The Indians believed, quite reasonably, that their religions were under attack by the East India Company.

Finally, Indians regardless of class, caste or religion felt oppressed and disrespected by the agents of the British East India Company. Company officials who abused or even murdered Indians were seldom punished properly; even if they were tried, they were rarely convicted, and those who were could appeal almost indefinitely. A general sense of racial superiority among the British fueled Indian anger across the country.

End of the Rebellion and Aftermath:

The Indian Revolt of 1857 lasted until June of 1858. In August, the Government of India Act of 1858 dissolved the British East India Company. The British government took direct control of the half of India formerly under the company, with various princes still in nominal control of the other half. Queen Victoria became the Empress of India.

The last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was blamed for the revolt (although he played little role in it). The British government sent him into exile in Rangoon, Burma. The Indian army also saw huge changes after the revolt. Instead of relying heavily on Bengali troops from the Punjab, the British began to recruit soldiers from the "martial races" - those peoples considered particularly warlike, such as the Gurkhas and the Sikhs.

Unfortunately, the Indian Revolt of 1857 did not result in freedom for India. In many ways, Britain reacted by taking firmer control of the "crown jewel" of its empire. It would be another ninety years before India (and Pakistan) gained their independence.