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The First War of Independence, 1857

The Uprising of 1857 A.D. – A Nationalist Outburst

After a hundred years of conquest and administration, the English East India Company faced a massive rebellion that started in May 1857 and threatened the Company's very presence in India. Sepoys mutinied in several places beginning from Meerut and a large number of people from different sections of society rose up in rebellion. Some regard it as the biggest armed resistance to colonialism in the nineteenth century anywhere in the world. The rebellion resulted in the end of the Company's rule in India and the beginning of the Crown's direct rule over India.

By 1856 A.D., the English had completed their conquests in India. Nearly a hundred years of Company's rule had neither been just nor fair. Based upon political intrigues, and the *divide and rule policy*, it also aimed at socio-cultural conquest of India.

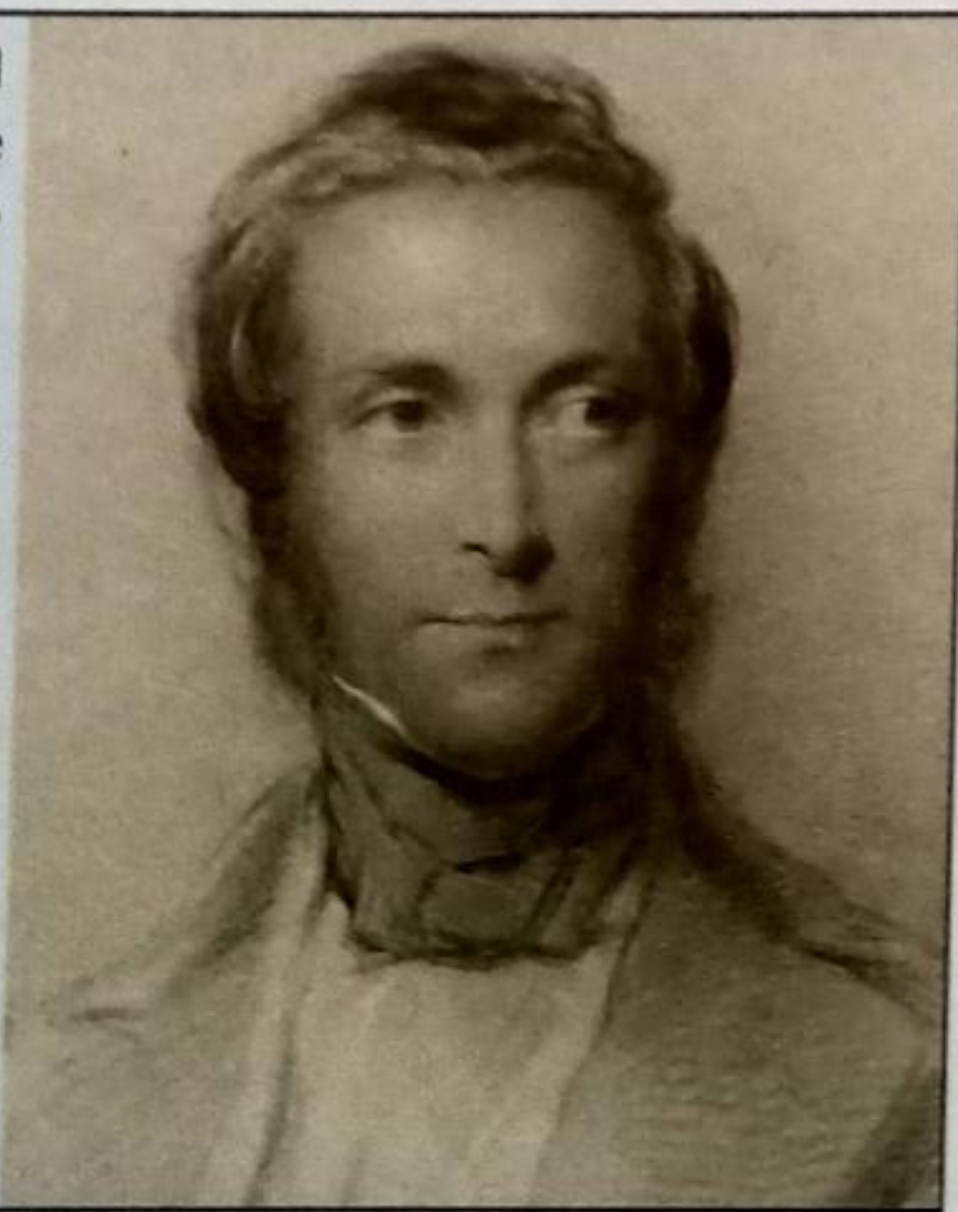
Causes of the Uprising of 1857 A.D.

The Uprising of 1857 A.D. was an outburst of nationalist sentiments. The Indian rulers and the people in general had not accepted the Company's rule. Between 1756 and 1856, there occurred

Lord Dalhousie introduced the **Doctrine of Lapse** which enabled him to annex vast territories.

According to this Doctrine, if a ruler of a dependent state died without leaving a natural heir, the state would pass over to the British. The doctrine did not recognise adopted children as rightful heirs.

Lord Dalhousie
Governor General of India
1846-56



twelve minor revolts against the Company's exploitative rule. There were several causes, of which some were Political, Socio-religious, Economic, Military, and an Immediate cause. All these had a cumulative effect, leading to the outbreak of *India's First War of Independence in 1857 A.D.*

The following were the major causes of this revolt :

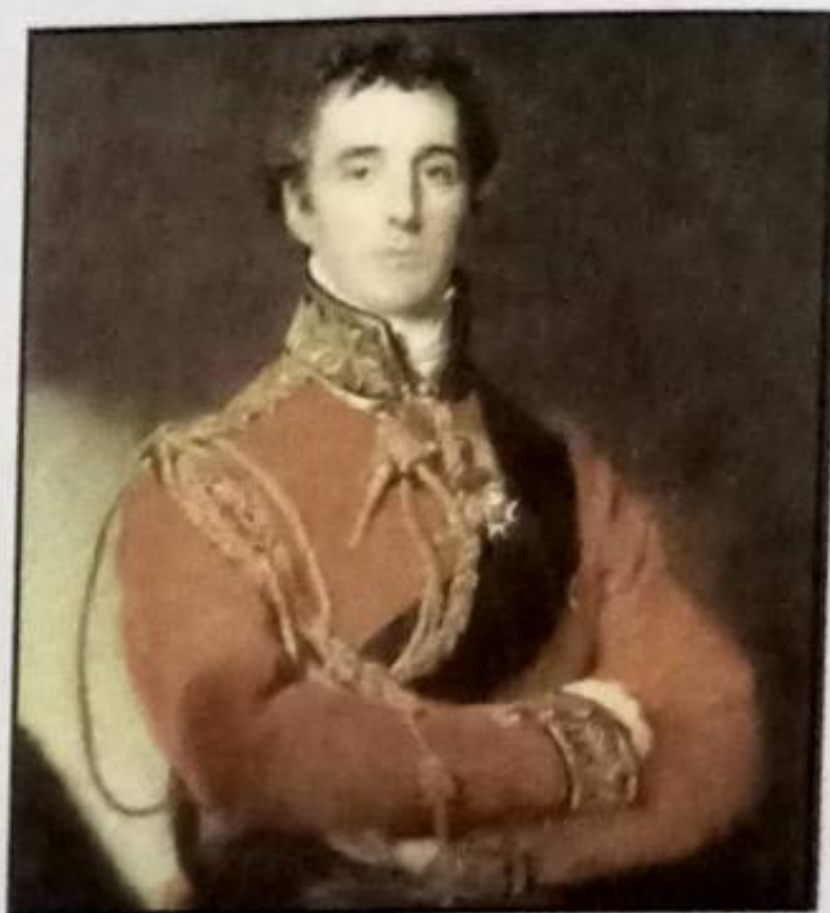
(A) Political Causes

The following were the political causes :

1. Company's Territorial Expansion/Policy of Annexation

Ever since the **Battle of Plassey** (June 1757), the Company's territorial expansion had been rapid. By 1818 A.D., when the last Peshwa was dethroned, all Princely States had either been annexed or compelled to sign **Treaties/Subsidiary Alliances** with the Company on the latter's own terms and conditions.

(a) **Subsidiary Alliance** : The doctrine of *subsidiary alliance* was introduced by **Lord Richard Wellesley**, British Governor General of India from 1798 to 1805.



Lord Wellesley introduced the Subsidiary Alliance

Its main principles were :

- Any Indian ruler accepting the subsidiary alliance with the East India Company had to keep the British Army within their territory and was supposed to pay for its maintenance.
- In lieu of the payments, some of the states' territory was ceded to the British.
- The ruler accepting it was forced to keep a British official at the court called 'Resident'.
- The states brought under British control by this system included Hyderabad, Gwalior, Indore, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Oudh.

(b) **Conquests** : In 1843 A.D., **Sindh** was attacked and annexed to the Company's domain. The revolts of *Diwan Mulraj of Multan* and *Chatter Singh Attariwala of Hazara* were used as a pretext to annex **Punjab** in 1849. These expansionist ambitions of the Company alarmed the Indian rulers and the people alike.

(c) Arbitrary Doctrine of Lapse : According to this Doctrine, if an Indian ruler of a dependent State **did not have his real son to succeed him**, he was not allowed to adopt a successor without the Company's consent. In this case, the State in question was annexed. Heirs adopted without the consent of the company could neither inherit the throne nor the title. They could inherit only the private property of the deceased ruler. By his Doctrine of Lapse, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India (1846–1856 A.D.), annexed three Maratha dependent States of **Satara, Nagpur, Jhansi** and several small principalities. For example, when the ruler of Jhansi died in 1853 A.D. without a child, the widowed Rani Lakshmi Bai was pensioned off, and their adopted son, Anand Rao, was not recognized by the Company, and Jhansi was annexed. The application of the Doctrine of Lapse caused widespread discontentment among the rulers and the people of the Indian Princely States. They were scared and apprehensive of the English rule.



Lakshmibai, The Rani of Jhansi, the queen of the Maratha-ruled princely state of Jhansi in North India, was one of the leading figures of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and a symbol of resistance to the British rule in India.

States Controlled by the Doctrine of Lapse	
Satara	1848
Sambalpur	1849
Baghat	1850
Udaipur	1852
Jhansi	1853
Nagpur	1854

(d) Unjust Annexation of Awadh : Awadh was a **protected feudatory** State with control over internal administration only. On February 13, 1856, Lord Dalhousie annexed Awadh on the pretext of

maladministration by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who was sent to Calcutta (Kolkata) on a pension of ₹ 12 lakh per annum. Consequently, a number of *taluqdars* or nobles, officials and the soldiers were deprived of their status, and rendered jobless.

Dalhousie's annexation of Awadh to the British Empire, was illegal and the people of Awadh were very displeased with the British.

(e) Annexation of Berar : Unable to pay the debt, Lord Dalhousie annexed **Berar** in 1853. The Nizam owed a huge amount to the English company on account of the contingent forces. As the Nizam was unable to pay, the debt reached to about 1,80,000 pounds. A new treaty was signed by which Nizam gave Berar to the English for the maintenance of the contingent.

Lord Dalhousie annexed the states (i) to **expand the British Empire**, (ii) to rule over India for a longer time or to **keep themselves in power**, (iii) to further **exploit India** and carry its wealth to England.

2. Unfair attitude towards the Mughal Emperor : Lord Dalhousie declared that after the death of Bahadur Shah Zaffar, the emperor and his successors would have to leave the royal palace, *i.e.*, the Red Fort. Later, Lord Canning, the next Governor General announced in 1856 A.D. that Bahadur Shah's successors would not be allowed even to use the title of a 'King'. Similarly, the Regal titles of the Nawabs of Carnatic and Tanjore were abolished. Such discourtesies were resented by the people and the Indian rulers.

3. Unpopular Administration of the Company : There were several reasons which made the British administration highly unpopular :

- The British officers were very arrogant and had contempt for the Indians.
- They were not easily approachable.
- Indians were not appointed on high posts in administration.
- The English officials had little knowledge of people's customs. The Indians found themselves out of place with English Language.
- Indians were not contented with the judicial system of the British.

4. India governed from a foreign land : India was administered by the British while sitting at a distance of thousands of miles away. The country was being drained of her wealth.

5. Stopping the Pension of Nana Sahib :

Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the Peshwa Baji Rao II, was denied his pension on the grounds that he was not a natural born heir. He was also not allowed to ascend the throne. This hurt the sentiments of the Hindu subjects of the Peshwas, and proved once again the cunningness of the East India Company towards Indians. Nana Sahib inherited enormous wealth which he used in sending emissaries to different parts of the country to gather support for the revolt.



Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the Peshwa, Baji Rao-II.

6. Role of Rumours : There were rumours that the territory of no ruling chief was safe. It was also widely believed that the days of Company's rule in India were numbered. The British came to Power in 1757 (after the Battle of Plassey) and their rule would come to an end in 1857.

(B) Socio-Religious Causes

1. Fear of Mass Conversion : Many activities of the Christian Missionaries and that of the government created panic among the masses that they would all be converted to Christianity.

- The teaching of the Christian doctrine was made compulsory in the schools set up by the Christian missionaries.
- The officials openly preached the Christian doctrine in mosques and temples.
- The Missionary Society of America established a press at Agra for the propaganda against the Hindu religion.
- The missionaries openly and everywhere condemned the Hindu scriptures, idol

worship and Hindu and Muslim doctrines and customs. They were active in some of the tribal areas and sometimes created hostile feelings among the tribes by disturbing their social, cultural and economic lives.

- Many temptations were offered to make **conversion** by giving the Indians *bribes, promotions and rewards*.
- The study of Bible was introduced in government schools.
- Prisoners in jails were instructed in Christianity.
- Police force was used for converting people to Christianity.
- The missionaries established *chaplain* and *churches* for the propagation of Christianity.
- A Christian priest was maintained in the army.
- Orphans and victims of calamities were often converted to Christianity.
- Land belonging to temples or mosques was taxed.

2. The Laws that interfered with the religious customs of the people : There were many laws which interfered with the religious customs of the people.

(i) General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 : Under this Act, new recruits were required to serve anywhere in India or overseas. This caused a great alarm amongst the Indian soldiers as according to the Hindu customs, crossing the sea was contrary to their religion.

(ii) The Religious Incompetence Law (Religious Disabilities Act, 1850) : According to this law, if a person belonging to the Hindu religion changed his religion, he could remain the heir of his ancestral property. According to the people, the law was enacted to promote the conversion of Hindus to Christianity.

(iii) Widow Remarriage Act, 1856 : Widow Remarriage Act legalised the widow remarriage. This was also not liked by the orthodox Hindus who favoured *Sati*.

(iv) **Other Prohibitions :** The government had also prohibited the Sati system, female infanticide and child marriage. All these measures were not liked by the common people.

3. Introduction of Railways and Telegraphs : The introduction of railways had created suspicion and fear in the minds of the people. They thought that these measures were introduced to propagate Christianity. It also meant that the people from lower castes, including the so-called untouchables, would sit in the same compartments and buy their tickets from the same window as people of the superior castes, including the *Brahmins*. The orthodox section considered it an attempt to interfere in the caste structure of its society and defile its religion. There was also a rumour that telegraph poles would be used for hanging people who were reluctant to embrace Christianity and railway tracks would be used to throw people in front of the railway engines and trains who were against the Company's rule. Thus the modern innovations threatened the old social order and created unrest among the people.

4. Fear of English Education : Christian missionaries and Government schools introduced the teaching of English in their institutions, particularly after 1833 A.D. This implied the shifting of emphasis from oriental learning (Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic and Urdu) to western learning. The *Pandits* and *Mullahs* resented this change, as they saw in it an attempt to discourage the study of Islamic and Hindu literatures. The new schools provided education to all, irrespective of caste and religion. This was not liked by the orthodox and the upper class Hindus.

5. General indignities hurled upon Indians : The English often ill-treated the Indians. They hurled insults and indignities upon them. They could even kill them without fear of punishment under law. The Indians were supposed to salute an Englishman or dismount from their horse till the Englishman passed from the sight. The British believed in social superiority and maintaining social distance to preserve their authority over the Indians. Special railway compartments, parks,

hotels and clubs were reserved for Europeans only. According to historian R.C. Majumdar, even Raja Ram Mohan Roy was insulted for not observing the above practice. Such type of undignified treatment of the Indians at the hands of the English rulers amounted to the adding of insult to injury. It hurt the self-respect of the Indians.

(C) Economic Exploitation of India

British economic policies in India worked against the interests of Indian Trade and Industry and thus ruined her financially. The economic exploitation of Indians and the drainage of Indian wealth to England became a potent cause of the uprising of the Revolt of 1857 A.D. as noted below :

1. The Ruin of Indian Trade and Handicrafts:

Before the arrival of the Britishers, India was the leading exporter of cotton textile. But at the beginning of the 19th century, its share started declining. An Act passed by British government in 1720 prohibited the use of Indian silk and calicoes in England. In 1811-12, the share of cotton textile and silk was about 33% which fell down to 3% in 1850-51. The anti-India British policies were responsible for this :

(i) They imposed heavy export duty on silk and cotton textile.

(ii) British goods were imported into India without any duty or at a very nominal duty.

(iii) British manufacturers flooded the Indian market with machine-made goods. Indian weavers and producers failed to compete with them.

(iv) Indian traders also suffered at the hands of the British traders. The British traders got many privileges and facilities as compared to the Indian traders.

(v) As a result of the anti-Indian economic policies of the British, the art of **spinning** and **weaving** which employed thousands of workers in India, became extinct. Manufacturing towns of Dacca, Murshidabad and Surat became desolate.

Their miseries increased with the disappearance of their traditional buyers – the Princes, Chieftains and zamindars.

The Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833 enhanced further the exploitation of India by British.

2. Impoverishment of Peasants : Through the **Permanent Settlement of 1793 A.D.** introduced in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the *Zamindar* was supposed to collect the land revenue. He was authorised to eject a peasant for the non-payment of revenue. In the South, the British revenue collectors were even more harsh towards the peasants. They claimed more than half the produce as **land revenue**. The poor cultivator was forced to borrow money from the landlord or moneylender at a heavy rate of interest. The peasants held the British responsible for their poverty in India. **Famines** occurred frequently in India. The famine of 1837-38 made the people desert their villages.

Permanent Settlement : A land revenue system was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal in 1793 under which the land revenue was fixed permanently.

3. India was converted into an Agricultural Colony : The British industrialists saw a rich source in India to provide them with raw materials for their industries. *Bengal, Bihar and Awadh* became major producers of export crops such as jute, opium, indigo, cotton and oilseeds. The English traders in India controlled the export trade. Only such crops, as were required in England, were allowed to be produced in India. Thus, India was converted into an agricultural colony of England, and her own indigenous agro-industries were ruined under a well-planned British policy.

4. III-treatment of Indigo-cultivators : A new plantation system introduced in 1833 brought incalculable misery for the Indian peasants. Indigo was required by cloth manufacturers to dye cloth. As the indigo trade grew, commercial agents and officials of the Company began investing in indigo production. They forced the peasants to produce only indigo. The condition of Indigo cultivators was miserable. Most of the cultivators were in a

debt trap. Peasants who were initially tempted by the loans soon realised how harsh the system was. The price they got for the indigo they produced was very low and the cycle of loans never ended.

Note : The cultivators of indigo in Bengal revolted against the government. This rebellion has been named as the "Blue Rebellion".

5. Confiscation of Estates : The Inam Commission appointed in 1852 A.D., asked the owners of large landed-estates to show the papers/documents of title-deeds as proof of their ownership. Many of them could not produce these documents, with the passage of time, the Company's Government confiscated about 20 thousand landed-estates of the *Taluqdars*. Lord Bentinck's resumption of rent free tenures reduced the land owners to poverty.

This caused a great resentment in the landed gentry, who became the natural supporters of the War of Independence in 1857 A.D.

6. Loss of Employment : Lakhs of artisans and craftsmen lost their livelihood due to the ruin of their industries, which was the result of *British export-import policies*. Annexation of *Awadh* and other Princely States rendered their soldiers jobless, because they were disbanded by the British. With the introduction of English education, thousands of **Pandits** and **Maulvis** lost their work and thousands of others feared losing work in the near future. This fear also contributed substantially towards the anti-British sentiments.

7. Drain of Indian wealth to England : The English Company and her officials carried away India's wealth to England in several ways as given here under :

(a) The Company paid £ 400 lakhs annually to the British Government in England, under a law of the British Parliament, passed in 1767 A.D.

(b) By paying high salaries to the British officials in civil and military administration, both in British and Princely India. They sent a large portion of their salaries home as savings.

(c) By requiring the Indian Princely States to pay a heavy cost for maintaining the Company's forces and the Residents in their areas.

(d) The Company officials collected huge wealth through interest on debts, bribes and gifts from Indian rulers, businessmen and others, which they carried away with them on return to England. In this way, India was impoverished by the British.

(D) Military Causes

The Indian sepoys employed in the company also had reasons for discontent :

1. Meagre British Troops in India : The ratio between the British soldiers and Indian soldiers was very low. This encouraged the sepoys to take up arms in 1857 A.D.

2. Higher Jobs and Salaries to the Englishmen in the Army : The Indian soldiers were not given a rank higher than that of a **Subedar**. All higher ranks were reserved for the Englishmen. They were also paid higher salaries than the Indian soldiers. This discrimination affected the morale of the Indian troops and made them unhappy and frustrated.

3. Ill-treating the Indian Troops : Besides the discrimination in pay and rank, the British officers in the Army ill-treated the Indian soldiers. They treated them as menial servants, inferior to their English masters. The British authorities forbade the sepoys from wearing caste or sectarian marks, beards or turbans. The English kept them at a distance in official and social life and thus humiliated the Company's very victors. This hurt the Indian soldiers.

4. Disbanding of Troops : The British disbanded the troops as well as the officers in the armies of the Princely States annexed by them and even in States which had entered into Subsidiary Alliances with the Company. A large number of Indian soldiers and officers thus became **unemployed**. They had no means to fall back upon.

5. General Service Enlistment Act : The Enlistment Act of 1856 A.D. passed by Lord Canning required that all recruits to the Bengal Army could be sent anywhere for service, within or outside India. This caused great alarm amongst the soldiers of the Bengal Army. They thought that crossing the sea was contrary to their religion. Even earlier, during the Anglo-Afghan war of 1839-42 A.D., the Bengal Army had resented when they had to

cross the river Indus to go outside India. The Indian soldiers were not even paid any extra allowances (Bhatta) for service outside India.

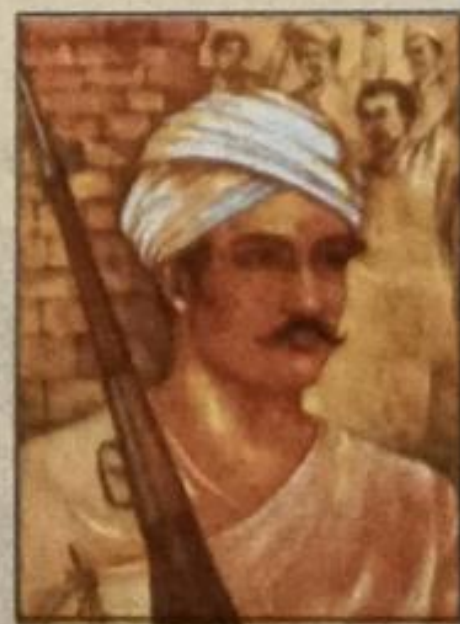
6. Defeat of British Troops in the First Afghan War : The British lost the First Afghan War even after an enormous waste of money and loss of human lives. This exposed the British weakness. The Indian troops gained confidence to be able to challenge the British in India too, at an opportune time which came in 1857 A.D.

7. Postage Office Act, 1854 : Indian soldiers used to send letters to their homes free of cost but in 1854, under the new act, they were deprived of that right.

8. The Immediate Cause : While there prevailed a seething discontent in the country, the sepoys too were agitated over the issue of **Greased Cartridges**. In January 1857 A.D., the Company had introduced **Enfield Rifle** in the **Bengal Army**. Greased cartridges were to be used in this Rifle. The soldiers had to bite the end of the cartridge with their mouth before using it. The cartridges were believed to be greased with the *fat of cow or pig*. The Sepoys felt that it was an attempt to defile both the Hindu and the Muslim religions. The news of the polluted cartridges spread to all military stations, causing general resentment among the Indian soldiers.

The Uprising Erupts

The Uprising at Meerut : On 26th February, 1857, the sepoys of the **19th Native Infantry** at Behrampur refused to accept the cartridges given to them. On 29th March, 1857, a Brahmin, named, **Mangal Pandey**, of the **34th Native Infantry** Regiment at Meerut (Barrackpore) refused to use the Greased Cartridges. When he was



forced to use these cartridges, he flew into a rage. He killed an English Adjutant of this regiment for which he was executed after a court martial on 8th April, 1857 at Barrackpore. **Mangal Pandey became a martyr in the eyes of his fellow soldiers**, who laid down his life for safeguarding their religion. Thus, Mangal Pandey was the first martyr of the Indian Uprising of 1857 A.D.