Chapter 10: Rebels and the Raj

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Why did the mutinous sepoys in many places turn to erstwhile rulers to provide leadership to the revolt?

To fight the British, the rebels needed leadership and organisation, so they turned to those who had been rulers before the British conquest. The sepoys of Meerut rushed to Delhi and appealed to the old Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah to accept the leadership; once he blessed the rebellion, the revolt gained a legitimacy because it could now be carried on in the name of the Mughal emperor. Similar scenes were enacted elsewhere: in Kanpur the people gave Nana Sahib, successor to Peshwa Baji Rao II, no choice but to lead them; in Jhansi the Rani was forced by popular pressure to take charge; Kunwar Singh, a zamindar of Arrah, was drawn in; and in Lucknow the people hailed Birjis Qadr, son of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. These traditional leaders commanded respect and loyalty, and many of them had lost their power and lands to the British, giving them their own reasons to rebel.

Q2 Discuss the evidence that indicates planning and coordination on the part of the rebels.

Several pieces of evidence suggest planning and coordination. The uprising followed a strikingly similar pattern in cantonment after cantonment, which points partly to planning. There was clearly communication between the sepoy lines: after the 7th Awadh Irregular Cavalry refused the new cartridges in early May, they wrote to the 48th Native Infantry that they had acted for the faith and awaited the 48th's orders. Sepoys and their emissaries moved from one station to another. The conversation between the Christian police inspector Sisten and a Muslim tahsildar of Bijnor (later identified as the principal rebel leader there) shows that the message of revolt was being discussed in advance. Decisions were also taken collectively: the matter of Captain Hearsey was to be settled by a panchayat of native officers, and Charles Ball recorded that panchayats were a nightly occurrence in the Kanpur sepoy lines. Since sepoys lived in lines, shared a common lifestyle and often came from the same caste, it is reasonable to conclude that they were the makers of their own rebellion.

Q3 Discuss the extent to which religious beliefs shaped the events of 1857.

Religious beliefs deeply shaped the events of 1857. The immediate trigger was the rumour that the new Enfield cartridges were greased with the fat of cows and pigs, biting which would corrupt the faith of both Hindus and Muslims; this spread like wildfire through the sepoy lines. Linked to it was the rumour that bone dust of cows and pigs had been mixed into the atta sold in markets, and a widespread fear that the British meant to destroy caste and religion and convert Indians to Christianity. These fears, aggravated by missionary activity and reforms like the abolition of sati, stirred people to action. A prophecy that British rule would end on the centenary of the Battle of Plassey (23 June 1857) reinforced the call to revolt. Religious men such as the maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who preached jehad, and self-styled prophets and fakirs gave leadership. The proclamations appealed to Hindus and Muslims alike to fight to save their faith, invoking both Muhammad and Mahavir. Thus religion supplied both the spark and a unifying language for the revolt.

Q4 What were the measures taken to ensure unity among the rebels?

The rebel leaders took deliberate care to forge unity across caste and creed. Proclamations and ishtahars repeatedly appealed to all sections of the population, irrespective of caste and religion, presenting the rebellion as a war in which Hindus and Muslims had equally to lose or gain. Though many proclamations were issued by Muslim princes or in their names, they took care to address the sentiments of Hindus and harked back to the Hindu-Muslim coexistence of the pre-British Mughal past. The proclamation issued under Bahadur Shah's name called upon the people to fight under the standards of both Muhammad and Mahavir. The Azamgarh Proclamation addressed zamindars, merchants, public servants, artisans, pundits and fakirs together, binding all social groups to the common cause. So effective was this unity that religious divisions were hardly noticeable during the uprising: when the British spent Rs 50,000 in Bareilly in December 1857 to incite Hindus against Muslims, the attempt failed.

Q5 What steps did the British take to quell the uprising?

The British took both legal and military steps. Before sending troops to reconquer North India, they passed a series of Acts in May and June 1857 that put the whole of North India under martial law and empowered military officers and even ordinary Britons to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion; ordinary processes of law were suspended and the only punishment for rebellion was death. Armed with these special laws and reinforcements from Britain, they mounted a two-pronged attack to recover the symbolically important city of Delhi, one force moving from Calcutta and the other from the largely peaceful Punjab; Delhi was finally captured in late September 1857. In the Gangetic plain reconquest was slow, carried out village by village against a hostile population, and Awadh was brought under control only in March 1858 after protracted fighting. The British also used political means: they tried to break the unity of landholders and peasants by promising to restore their estates to big landholders, dispossessing rebel landholders and rewarding the loyal. Finally, rebels were brutally executed, blown from guns or hanged, to perform terror and demonstrate British invincibility.

Q6 Why was the revolt particularly widespread in Awadh? What prompted the peasants, taluqdars and zamindars to join the revolt?

The revolt was particularly intense and long-lasting in Awadh because here a chain of grievances linked prince, taluqdar, peasant and sepoy, so that virtually all sections of society identified firangi raj with the end of their world.

The annexation of 1856 struck the first blow. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, far from being the unpopular ruler the British assumed, was widely loved; when he was dethroned and exiled to Calcutta on the plea of misgovernment, Lucknow was plunged into grief, with people following him to Kanpur singing songs of lament. As one observer put it, 'the life was gone out of the body.' The dissolution of the court also destroyed the livelihoods of musicians, dancers, poets, artisans, cooks and retainers.

The taluqdars were the next to be hit. Before the British, they had held land and power for generations, maintained armed retainers and forts, and enjoyed autonomy under the Nawab. After annexation they were disarmed and their forts destroyed. The Summary Settlement of 1856, assuming they were interlopers, removed them wherever possible: the share of villages they held fell from 67 per cent to 38 per cent, and those of southern Awadh were hardest hit. Many, loyal to the Nawab, later joined Begum Hazrat Mahal in Lucknow to fight the British.

The peasants gained nothing. British hopes that removing taluqdars would lighten peasant burdens failed; revenue flows rose but the demand on peasants did not fall, and large areas were overassessed by 30 to 70 per cent. The old ties of loyalty and patronage, under which the taluqdar, though an oppressor, had acted as a generous father figure in times of hardship, were broken, leaving the peasant exposed to inflexible collection.

Finally, these grievances were carried into the sepoy lines, for a vast majority of sepoys were recruited from the villages of Awadh, the 'nursery of the Bengal Army.' Added to low pay, difficulty in getting leave and growing racial abuse by white officers, the villagers' discontent meant that when the sepoys rose, their brethren in the countryside swiftly joined them.

Q7 What did the rebels want? To what extent did the vision of different social groups differ?

Reconstructing what the rebels wanted is difficult because, as victors, the British recorded their own version while the rebels, mostly illiterate sepoys and ordinary people, left few records. What we have comes chiefly from a handful of proclamations and ishtahars, such as the Azamgarh Proclamation of August 1857.

Broadly, the rebels wanted to restore a familiar, cherished world that British rule had destroyed. The proclamations rejected everything associated with firangi raj: they condemned the annexations and broken treaties, argued that the British could not be trusted, and attacked the land revenue settlements that had dispossessed landholders big and small and the foreign commerce that had ruined artisans and weavers. Above all they expressed the fear that the British meant to destroy the caste and religion of Hindus and Muslims and convert them to Christianity, and they urged people to come together to save their livelihood, faith, honour and identity for the 'greater public good.'

The vision of unity was deliberately cultivated, appealing across caste and creed and glorifying the pre-British Hindu-Muslim past. The Azamgarh Proclamation addressed distinct social groups, zamindars, merchants, public servants, artisans, pundits and fakirs, promising each the restoration of its position under a Badshahi government: light revenue demands and dignity for zamindars, open trade for merchants, higher posts and pay for public servants, royal employment for artisans. In this sense the leadership, drawn from courts, rajas, nawabs and taluqdars, wanted to restore the eighteenth-century Mughal world and the culture of the court.

Yet the vision of ordinary rebels sometimes went further. In many places the rebellion widened into an attack on all local oppressors: moneylenders' houses were looted, account books burnt, and city elites deliberately humiliated. This reflected an attempt to overturn traditional hierarchies and offered a glimpse of a more egalitarian society, a vision that was not articulated in the proclamations, which sought only to unite all groups against the firangi.

Q8 What do visual representations tell us about the revolt of 1857? How do historians analyse these representations?

Pictorial images, paintings, pencil drawings, etchings, posters, cartoons and bazaar prints, produced by both the British and Indians, are an important record of the revolt. Since few records survive of the rebels' point of view, and historians have had to rely heavily on British official accounts, letters, diaries and newspaper reports, visual representations are a valuable additional source. But they do not simply reflect events; they express how their makers perceived them, and they also shaped the sensibilities of the public that viewed, bought and displayed them.

British images served several purposes. Some celebrated the saviours: Thomas Jones Barker's 'Relief of Lucknow' (1859) places the British heroes Campbell, Outram and Havelock at the centre of a well-lit canvas, turning the siege into a story of heroic survival and the triumph of British power, reassuring the public that the rebellion was over. Others, inflamed by newspaper tales of violence against women and children, stirred demands for revenge. Joseph Noel Paton's 'In Memoriam' shows English women and children huddled helplessly awaiting an unseen but brutish enemy, while sketches of Miss Wheeler show her heroically defending her honour, and the Bible, against demonised rebels. Cartoons in Punch, such as the female figure of 'Justice' trampling sepoys and 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger,' sanctioned brutal retribution. Images of executions, rebels blown from guns or hanged in rows, performed terror in the open to instil fear. By contrast, nationalist imageries later celebrated 1857 as the First War of Independence, portraying leaders like Rani Lakshmi Bai as a masculine warrior fighting for her motherland.

Historians therefore analyse these images critically, asking who made them, for whom, and to what end. They read them not as neutral windows onto events but as evidence of the emotions, prejudices and purposes of their makers and audiences, and of how images both reflected and shaped feelings on both sides.

Q9 Examine any two sources presented in the chapter, choosing one visual and one text, and discuss how these represent the point of view of the victor and the vanquished.

A useful pair is the visual 'Relief of Lucknow' by Thomas Jones Barker (1859) and the textual Azamgarh Proclamation of 25 August 1857, one voicing the victor's perspective, the other the vanquished.

Barker's painting speaks for the victors. It commemorates the British relief of the besieged Residency at Lucknow, placing the heroes Campbell, Outram and Havelock at the centre of a well-lit canvas, with the gestures of surrounding figures leading the eye towards them. The dead and injured in the foreground testify to British suffering during the siege, while the triumphant horses in the middle ground stress that British power and control had been re-established. To the British public the painting was reassuring: it declared that the time of trouble was past, the rebellion was over, and the British were the victors. It thus presents the revolt from the standpoint of survival, heroic resistance and the ultimate triumph of empire.

The Azamgarh Proclamation speaks for the vanquished, giving us one of our main glimpses of what the rebels wanted. Issued in the name of the Badshahi government, it denounces the 'infidel and treacherous English' and sets out, section by section, the grievances of zamindars ruined by exorbitant revenue demands and auctioned estates, merchants crushed by monopolies and taxes, public servants denied respect and high office, and artisans thrown out of work by English goods. It promises each group restoration and dignity under a revived indigenous rule and summons pundits and fakirs to a holy war to save religion. Where Barker's painting closes the story in triumph, the proclamation opens up the rebels' own understanding of why they fought.

Together the two sources show that evidence of 1857 is partisan. The victor's image celebrates and reassures; the vanquished's text accuses and appeals. Reading them against each other lets the historian recover both perspectives rather than only the one the colonial record preserved most fully.

Q10 On an outline map of India, mark Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), three major centres of British power in 1857. Refer to Maps 1 and 2 and plot the areas where the revolt was most widespread. How close or far were these areas from the colonial cities?

On an outline map of India, mark the three colonial power centres named in the chapter, Calcutta (Kolkata) in the east, Bombay (Mumbai) in the west and Madras (Chennai) in the south. Then shade the belt where the revolt was most widespread, the Gangetic plain and north India around Delhi, Meerut, Aligarh, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah, and above all Awadh with Lucknow and Kanpur, together with Jhansi, Arrah (Bihar) and Bareilly, the centres of revolt shown on Map 2. On completing this, note that these rebel areas lay in the heart of north India, far inland from the three presidency cities on the coast, so the revolt was concentrated well away from the main colonial cities.

Q11 Read a biography of any one of the leaders of the revolt of 1857. Check the sources used by the biographer. Do these include government reports, newspaper accounts, stories in regional languages, visual material, anything else? Do all the sources say the same thing, or are there differences? Prepare a report on your findings.

For this project, choose one leader mentioned in the chapter, for example Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Kunwar Singh, Shah Mal or Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, and read one biography of that person. As you read, list the kinds of sources the biographer has used, such as government and mutiny reports, newspaper accounts, stories, songs and poems in regional languages, letters, and visual material like paintings or prints, and note whether all the sources agree or whether they differ, keeping in mind the chapter's point that the victor's record and the rebels' own voice often tell the story differently. Prepare a short report comparing the sources and explaining the differences you find.

Q12 See a film made on the revolt of 1857 and write about the way it represents the revolt. How does it depict the British, the rebels, and those who remained loyal to the British? What does it say about peasants, city dwellers, tribals, zamindars and taluqdars? What kind of a response does the film seek to evoke?

For this project, watch one film made on the revolt of 1857 and write about how it represents the uprising. Note how the film portrays the British, the rebels, and those who stayed loyal to the British, and what it shows about the different social groups the chapter discusses, peasants, city dwellers, tribals, zamindars and taluqdars. Finally, reflect on the kind of response the film tries to evoke in its audience, linking this, as the chapter suggests for visual representations, to the point of view and purpose of its makers.