



Modern Indian History Series

# 1857 Revolt : Causes of Failure and Evaluation

## Causes of Failure and Evaluation | Modern Indian History | UPSC

Causes of Failure | Evaluation | Historiography | Savarkar | Majumdar

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## Why the Revolt of 1857 Failed

*Twelve reasons the largest challenge to British rule could not succeed*

### 1. No Single Leadership or Plan

This was the biggest weakness. In Delhi, **Bahadur Shah Zafar** became the symbolic emperor. In Kanpur, **Nana Saheb** led the struggle. In Lucknow, **Begum Hazrat Mahal** became the face of resistance. In Jhansi, **Rani Lakshmibai** fought fiercely. In Bihar, **Kunwar Singh** led the uprising. **Tatya Tope** kept moving from one centre to another.

All these leaders fought the British, but they did not fight under one united command. There was no single headquarters, no common military strategy, and no central authority to coordinate all the rebel centres. The British could suppress the revolt centre by centre — first Delhi, then Kanpur, then Lucknow, then Jhansi.

### 2. Limited Geographical Spread

The revolt was strongest in North India and parts of Central India. Large parts of South India remained quiet. Many western and eastern areas also did not become major centres. The British were not fighting the whole subcontinent at once. The revolt was massive, but regionally concentrated.

### 3. Not a Fully National Revolt

Different groups had different reasons for fighting. Sepoys were angry over military grievances. Some rulers fought because their states had been annexed.

Some taluqdars had lost land and power. Common people were angry because of British interference. There was no one common national programme. Not everyone was fighting for the same future.

### 4. Many Indian Powers Did Not Join

Many rulers stayed neutral or watched from the side. Some feared that if the British fell, another Indian power would dominate them. Some may have feared Mughal revival. Others may have feared Maratha power. They did not trust each other enough. Even though the British were the common enemy, Indian unity remained incomplete.

### 5. Some Indian Groups Actively Supported the British

Many **Sikhs** fought on the British side. Many **Gurkhas** also supported the British. Several princely states remained loyal. Gwalior's Scindia, Hyderabad's Nizam, and others gave the British strength at a very difficult time. The British were not fighting alone.

**UPSC Note:** The loyalty of Indian rulers and groups during 1857 is a frequently tested topic. Key allies of the British: Scindia (Gwalior), Nizam (Hyderabad), Sikh chiefs (Punjab), Gurkhas (Nepal), Holkar (Indore), rulers of Rajputana.

### 6. Better British Organisation and Discipline

British officers followed a clearer chain of command. Orders moved more efficiently. Their army was more

disciplined. Different columns and commanders coordinated better. The rebels often fought with passion, but not always with coordination.

### 7. Better British Weapons, Supplies, and Finances

The British had stronger artillery and more regular supplies. They had better access to money and military stores. The rebels often suffered from shortages — lacking steady ammunition, proper supply systems, and organised military support.

### 8. Railways and Telegraph

With the **telegraph**, messages could travel quickly. With the **railways**, troops could move faster. Even if one area suddenly rebelled, the British could communicate fast, send reinforcements, and respond in an organised way. The rebels did not have such a communication network.

### 9. Rebels Lacked Stable Administration

Capturing a city is one thing. Running it is another. The rebels could rise suddenly and defeat local British authority. But in many places, they could not build stable administration afterward. They lacked regular supply, long-term finance, and a strong governing structure.

### 10. British Received Fresh Reinforcements

In the beginning, the British were shocked and the revolt spread quickly. But after the first shock, they regrouped. Fresh troops came. More resources arrived. At first, the rebels seemed to be advancing. Later, the British returned with greater force.

### 11. Rebels Could Capture but Not Hold Territory

Delhi was taken by rebels, then recaptured. Kanpur changed hands. Lucknow was a long struggle, but the British won. Jhansi fell. Kalpi fell. Gwalior was recovered. The rebels could create a powerful uprising, but they could not maintain long-term military control. In war, holding territory is just as important as capturing it.

### 12. Capable British Commanders

Commander	Role
John Nicholson	Led the British assault on Delhi
Henry Havelock	Moved fast in Kanpur-Lucknow; helped British recover ground
Colin Campbell	Main figure in crushing Lucknow and Awadh resistance
Hugh Rose	Defeated rebels at Jhansi, Kalpi, and Gwalior step by step

## How Should We Evaluate 1857?

*Sepoy Mutiny, Great Revolt, or First War of Independence?*

### The Colonial View — Just a Mutiny

Some British writers and officials tried to reduce 1857 to only a military mutiny. Their idea was simple: the revolt began in the army, so it was only a sepoy disturbance. In colonial writing, it was called the **Sepoy Mutiny** or the **Indian Mutiny**. **Lord Palmerston** is often associated with the line that it was merely a military mutiny.

### The Critical Historians

**S. N. Sen** saw 1857 mainly as a military rising at the start, though other groups joined later. **R. C. Majumdar** gave the most famous criticism of the nationalist interpretation. He argued that 1857 was **neither first, nor national, nor a war of independence**.

Their reasoning: the revolt began with sepoys, did not spread equally across India, had no single national leadership, and rebels fought for different aims, not one common modern programme.

### The Nationalist View — War of Independence

Even in Britain, **Benjamin Disraeli** raised in Parliament whether this was just a mutiny or a wider national revolt. Later, Indian nationalists strongly argued for the independence interpretation.

**V. D. Savarkar** famously called it **The First War of Independence** (in his 1909 book). **Jawaharlal Nehru** also wrote that it was much more than a military mutiny — in many places it took the form of a popular rebellion and a struggle for freedom.

### The Marxist and Social View

**Karl Marx** was one of the earliest writers to see 1857 through a class and colonial exploitation lens. He linked the revolt to the wider suffering created by British rule, not just sepoy anger. **R. P. Dutt** (Marxist historian) argued that 1857 had a strong people's and peasant base in many regions.

### The Modern Balanced View

**Eric Stokes** showed that 1857 was not one single movement but a combination of many local uprisings with different social roots. **Rudrangshu Mukherjee**, especially through Awadh, showed how in some regions it became a broad popular resistance, not just a sepoy revolt.

Thinker	View of 1857
Palmerston	Merely a military mutiny
Disraeli	Questioned if it was wider than a mutiny (in Parliament)

V. D. Savarkar	The First War of Independence (1909 book)
Jawaharlal Nehru	More than a mutiny; popular rebellion in many places
S. N. Sen	Began as military rising; other groups joined later
R. C. Majumdar	Neither first, nor national, nor war of independence
Karl Marx	Linked to colonial exploitation and class suffering
R. P. Dutt	Strong peasant and people's base; not just a mutiny
Eric Stokes	Combination of many local uprisings with different social roots
R. Mukherjee	Broad popular resistance in regions like Awadh

**UPSC Note:** The historiography of 1857 is a very important topic for UPSC Mains. Questions often ask you to critically evaluate different perspectives. The balanced view — that it started as a military revolt, expanded into a broader anti-British uprising, and is remembered as the First War of Independence — is the most recommended answer approach.

## The Balanced Judgment

*What 1857 was — and what it was not*

1857 began as a sepoy mutiny, but it did not remain only that. It spread outward. It drew in princes, landlords, peasants, old ruling families, and sections of the common people. In some places it remained mainly military. In some places it became civil and popular.

Can we call it a modern national movement like the twentieth century freedom struggle? Not fully. It did not yet have modern nationalism. There was no all-India political organisation, no common national programme, and no single idea of a modern Indian nation-state.

But can we dismiss it as only a small military mutiny? No. It shook British rule far beyond the army. It involved many social groups. And in Indian memory, it became the first great armed challenge to colonial rule.

**1857 was a turning point in Indian history.** It failed on the battlefield. Yet it changed the future. It ended the rule of the East India Company. Power passed to the British Crown. And the British understood: India could not be ruled carelessly anymore.

**UPSC Note:** The Government of India Act 1858 (2 August 1858) ended Company rule. Queen Victoria's Proclamation (1 November 1858) promised no further annexation and religious tolerance. The Indian Councils Act 1861 followed. These are frequently tested consequences.

### SUMMARY

## Quick Revision — All Key Points

### 12 Causes of Failure

No united leadership. Limited geography. Different aims. Incomplete Indian unity. Some groups supported British (Sikhs, Gurkhas, Scindia, Nizam). Better British discipline, weapons, supplies. Railways and telegraph. Rebels lacked stable administration. British reinforcements. Rebels could not hold territory. Capable British commanders.

### Historiography — Key Views

Colonial view: Sepoy Mutiny (Palmerston). Nationalist view: First War of Independence (Savarkar, Nehru). Critical view: Neither first nor national (Majumdar). Marxist view: class and peasant base (Marx, Dutt). Modern view: combination of local uprisings (Stokes, Mukherjee).

### The Balanced Answer

Started as military revolt. Expanded into broader anti-British uprising. Not a modern national movement. But far more than a mere mutiny. A turning point: ended Company rule, led to Crown rule, and became India's first great armed challenge to colonialism.

### Key UPSC Points

Historiography debate is important for Mains. Know all views by name. Govt of India Act 1858. Queen's Proclamation 1 Nov 1858. Indian Councils Act 1861. British allies: Scindia, Nizam, Sikhs, Gurkhas. British commanders: Nicholson, Havelock, Campbell, Rose.



## The Core Takeaway

The Revolt of 1857 failed not because Indians lacked courage. It failed because courage was divided, while British power was organised. There was no single plan, no united command, and no shared vision of the future.

But even in failure, 1857 left behind a warning for the empire and a lasting memory in Indian history. It ended the East India Company. It forced the British to rethink how they governed India. And in Indian memory, it became the first great armed challenge to colonial rule.

The name changes with the viewpoint — Sepoy Mutiny, Great Revolt, or First War of Independence. But one thing is certain: **1857 was not a minor event. It was a turning point.**

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#### **Episode 8: Consequences & Legacy of 1857**

The aftermath: End of Company Rule, Queen's Proclamation, and how 1857 shaped modern India.