NATURE, PATTERN AND SPREAD OF THE UPRISING

The revolt of 1857 began dramatically on **10 May 1857 at Meerut**, when sepoys in the cantonment broke out in mutiny, seized arms, attacked British officers, and destroyed government institutions.

What is significant is not merely the outbreak itself, but the speed and manner in which it spread. The rebels moved swiftly to Delhi, where they declared the ageing Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, as their leader.

This act was crucial, for it transformed what might have remained a military mutiny into a rebellion that carried **political legitimacy**, since it was now conducted in the name of the Mughal emperor.

The revolt did not remain confined to the sepoys. Ordinary people of towns and surrounding villages joined the uprising, attacking symbols of colonial authority and, in many cases, local elites.

This participation marked the transition from a **sepoy mutiny to a broader civil rebellion**, revealing that the uprising drew strength from widespread social discontent.

A striking feature of the revolt was the **uniformity in its pattern across different regions**. In almost every cantonment, the uprising began with a signal—such as the firing of a gun or the sounding of a bugle—followed by the seizure of the "bell of arms", looting of the treasury, and destruction of government buildings like courts, jails, and telegraph offices.

Such similarity suggests that the revolt was not entirely spontaneous but involved **planning, communication, and coordination among sepoys**.

History ch 2 part 3

As the rebellion spread, its character evolved. Initially directed against British authority, it soon extended to include attacks on **moneylenders and wealthy elites**, who were perceived as allies of the colonial state.

Peasants and common people joined in looting their houses and destroying records. This widening of targets indicates that the revolt also embodied a **social protest against oppression and inequality**, not merely a political revolt against colonial rule.

The collapse of British authority in many regions during the early months of the revolt was dramatic.

Administrative systems broke down, and everyday life was severely disrupted. Reports from cities like Delhi describe shortages of food and essential commodities, disruption of water supply, and a breakdown of normal social order.

These conditions reveal the extent to which the revolt created a **state of social and economic dislocation**, affecting all sections of society.

Communication played a crucial role in sustaining the rebellion. Sepoys exchanged information through letters and emissaries, moving from one cantonment to another.

There is evidence that decisions were often taken collectively through informal assemblies or **panchayats**, suggesting a degree of organisation and shared purpose.

The sepoys, who often shared common caste backgrounds and regional identities, were thus not passive participants but **active agents who shaped the course of the rebellion**.

Leadership during the revolt was complex and varied. In many cases, rebels turned to traditional rulers such as Bahadur Shah, Nana Sahib, Rani Lakshmibai, and Kunwar Singh.

However, these leaders did not always initiate the revolt; rather, they were often compelled by popular pressure to assume leadership.

Alongside them, **religious figures, fakirs, and local leaders** played an important role in mobilising people, demonstrating that leadership emerged from multiple social levels.

An essential element in the mobilisation of people was the role of **rumours and prophecies**. The belief that the cartridges of the new Enfield rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs created deep anxiety among both Hindu and Muslim sepoys, as it threatened their religious identities.

Other rumours suggested that the British intended to destroy Indian religions and convert people to Christianity. These fears were reinforced by prophecies

that British rule would end in 1857, a hundred years after the Battle of Plassey.

Rumours, however, cannot be understood simply in terms of their factual accuracy. Their significance lies in what they reveal about the **mental world of the people**—their fears, suspicions, and perceptions.

The spread of such rumours was linked to the broader context of British policies, which appeared to threaten established social and religious practices. Thus, the revolt was rooted not only in material grievances but also in a **deep psychological sense of insecurity and cultural threat**.

AWADH – THE EPICENTRE OF DISCONTENT

The revolt of 1857 found one of its strongest expressions in the region of **Awadh**, where a combination of political, economic, and social factors created widespread discontent.

The annexation of Awadh in 1856 by Lord Dalhousie marked a turning point. Although justified on the grounds of misgovernance, the annexation was driven by strategic and economic considerations, as the region was fertile and commercially valuable.

Before annexation, Awadh had been bound to the British through the **Subsidiary Alliance**, which had already reduced the Nawab's autonomy.

The final annexation, however, resulted in the deposition and exile of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. This event had a profound emotional impact on the people, who regarded the Nawab as a legitimate and beloved ruler.

Contemporary accounts describe widespread mourning, with songs of lament expressing a deep sense of loss.

The removal of the Nawab led to the collapse of the court and its associated culture. A large number of people—musicians, poets, artisans, and administrative officials—lost their livelihoods.

Thus, the annexation did not merely involve a change in political authority; it resulted in the **disintegration of an entire cultural and economic system**.

The British policies in Awadh also disrupted the existing social order. The **taluqdars**, who had traditionally controlled land and exercised local authority, were disarmed and dispossessed. Under the Summary Settlement of 1856, many taluqdars lost a significant portion of their land. The British believed that removing taluqdars would benefit peasants and increase revenue, but in practice, it led to widespread dissatisfaction among both groups.

Peasants, who had earlier depended on taluqdars for support during times of hardship, now faced heavy revenue demands and rigid collection methods.

The breakdown of the traditional system of patronage exposed them directly to the authority of the colonial state, which was often seen as impersonal and oppressive. Thus, both taluqdars and peasants had strong reasons to resent British rule.

The revolt in Awadh was characterised by the active participation of taluqdars, who mobilised peasants and joined the rebellion.

Their involvement helped to link elite and popular resistance, making the uprising in Awadh particularly intense and sustained. Leaders like Begum Hazrat Mahal played a crucial role in organising resistance against the British.

An important factor in the spread of the revolt was the close connection between sepoys and the rural society of Awadh. Many sepoys were recruited from villages in the region and shared the same social background as the peasants.

As a result, grievances in the countryside were quickly transmitted to the sepoy lines, and vice versa. This connection ensured that when sepoys rebelled, they were **rapidly supported by rural populations**, leading to a widespread and coordinated uprising.

The relationship between sepoys and British officers had also deteriorated over time. In earlier decades, British officers maintained close personal relations with sepoys, participating in their social life and respecting their customs.

However, by the 1840s, this relationship had changed significantly. Officers began to display racial arrogance, treating sepoys as inferiors and often resorting to abuse and violence. This erosion of trust created an atmosphere of suspicion, which was further intensified by the issue of the greased cartridges.

In Awadh, therefore, the revolt represented a convergence of multiple grievances—political dispossession, economic exploitation, social disruption, and cultural alienation. It became a powerful expression of **popular resistance against an alien and oppressive order**, involving a wide range of social groups united by a common sense of injustice.

IDEOLOGY, OBJECTIVES AND SUPPRESSION

Understanding what the rebels wanted is a challenging task, as most of the available sources were produced by the British, who often portrayed the rebels in a negative light.

The rebels themselves left behind few written records, apart from proclamations and petitions. Nevertheless, these sources provide valuable insights into the **ideas and objectives that motivated the uprising**.

A central theme in rebel proclamations was the emphasis on **unity across religious and social divisions**. The rebels repeatedly appealed to both Hindus and Muslims, highlighting their shared interests and common grievances.

The revolt was presented as a collective struggle in which all communities had a stake. This vision of unity was reinforced by references to the Mughal past, which was portrayed as a period of harmony and coexistence.

The **Azamgarh Proclamation** is one of the most important documents that sheds light on the rebel perspective. It denounced British rule as tyrannical and exploitative, and addressed various sections of society—zamindars, merchants, artisans, and soldiers—promising to restore their rights and privileges.

The proclamation criticised high revenue demands, trade monopolies, and the destruction of indigenous industries, presenting a comprehensive critique of colonial policies.

The grievances of different social groups were clearly articulated. Zamindars were angered by the loss of land and honour due to high revenue demands and legal harassment. Merchants resented the monopolisation of trade by the British and the imposition of taxes.

Artisans suffered from the influx of British manufactured goods, which destroyed traditional industries and reduced them to poverty. Sepoys were dissatisfied with low pay, racial discrimination, and interference with their religious practices, particularly in the case of the greased cartridges.

Religious concerns also played a significant role in shaping the ideology of the revolt. There was a widespread belief that the British intended to undermine Indian religions and convert people to Christianity.

The revolt was therefore seen as a struggle to protect **faith, honour, and identity**, giving it a moral and ideological dimension.

At the same time, the revolt involved a rejection of all symbols of colonial authority, often referred to as “firangi

raj". Rebels attacked government buildings, destroyed records, and targeted those associated with the British.

In some cases, the rebellion also took the form of a social uprising, with attacks on moneylenders and elites. These actions suggest the presence of **egalitarian impulses**, although such ideas were not explicitly articulated in official proclamations.

The rebels also attempted to establish alternative systems of governance in areas under their control. In cities like Delhi and Lucknow, they made administrative appointments, organised revenue collection, and maintained military structures.

These efforts were inspired by the institutions of the Mughal period, reflecting a desire to restore the pre-colonial order. However, these structures were largely temporary and could not withstand the military strength of the British.

The suppression of the revolt was carried out with considerable brutality. The British imposed martial law, allowing summary executions and bypassing normal legal procedures.

Reinforcements were brought in, and a systematic campaign was launched to recapture rebel-held territories. The reconquest was slow and difficult, as the British faced widespread resistance, particularly in rural areas where villagers used guerrilla tactics.

To weaken the rebellion, the British adopted a policy of dividing their opponents. Loyal landholders were rewarded with the restoration of their estates, while rebels were punished through confiscation and execution. This strategy helped to break the unity between different social groups that had initially supported the revolt.