

First War of Independence

Celebration of the 150th Year of India's First War of Independence Organised by Orissa Legislative Assembly on 17.10.2007 at Sardar Patel Hall

It is a matter of great pleasure and pride that the Orissa Legislative Assembly is commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the First War of India's Independence, a landmark in our history of freedom struggle. This war, though crushed by the British by use of excessive force and ruthlessness, provided the required impetus for the growth of nationalism and patriotism and was the warning signal to the mighty empire.

The reasons behind that great war were many, ranging from social, economic to religious and administrative. The events in 1857, which led to the war, were a culmination of large scale anguish in the army and exploitation by the British. Here, I would like to quote what was published in The Times, London on February 23, 1856 and I quote, "The cartridges of the new Enfield Rifle are greased at one end to make them slip readily in to the barrel. The Government ordered mutton fat for the purpose. Some contractors to save a few shillings gave pigs and bullocks". This had already infuriated the Hindus as well as the Muslims.

So it is clear that there was wide spread resentment in the army as well as among the common people. The feeling of patriotism had yet not inspired the masses, but hatred was brewing everywhere. Though the house burning and the mysterious fire in Barrakpore's 34 Native Infantry was the immediate cause of disturbance which later flared into an uprising, the events in the three / four decades immediately before 1857 were proof enough that people in different parts of the country led by charismatic local leaders had made life miserable and painful for the British.

During 1830-31, the Kolhas of Ranchi, Singhbhum, Hajaribag, Palamu and Manbhum revolted. In 1836, the Santhals joined and the year witnessed fiery fights between the tribals and the British. Even at one point of time 400 villages were released from the British and people there were "free". Similarly, the period 1828-32 saw the tribes of Assam namely, Khamit, Singhfus, Moamari, Maga, Naga, Khasi and Garo waging guerrilla warfare against the British. The British were ruthless in suppressing these uprisings. Many were sent to the gallows and many were imprisoned and tortured. The Bhils and their sub-tribe the Kolis by nature were brave and warrior-like. During the years of 1827, 1839 and 1848 the Bhils and Kolis made life hell for the British in midland India. Uprisings had started in Nepal also. Similarly, the son of the great Tipu Sultan fought bravely against the British from 1813 to 1831.

Orissa had seen a powerful uprising by the Kondhs when king Dhanajaya Bhanja of Ghumusar was arrested by the British. The uprising led by Dora Bisoi and later by Chakara Bisoi continued till 1855 when the king of Boudh was sent to Hazaribag prison. March 1816 witnessed ferocious battle by the Kondhs. Earlier Jayee Rajguru and Buxi Jagabandhu had organized the Paikas and fought the British. In other parts of Orissa, Veer Surendra Sai and his brothers led the revolt. Similarly other parts of India had already witnessed fights against the British. The revolt of Virabhadra Raja and Jagannath Raja in 1830 at Vizagpatnam, the Kurnool revolt of 1835 led by Narsingh Reddy, the Kolhapur uprising in 1844 were other instances.

In a sense the whole of India was on the boil and in 1857 it exploded. At first it was apparently a mere military mutiny, but it speedily changed its character and became a national insurrection. From Shahabad to Jhanshi, from Ayodhya to other parts of Uttar Pradesh, the mutiny spread like a forest fire. People in large numbers joined. As news spread, large scale looting of Government property began. Jhanshi Rani Laxmi Bai, Nana Saheb, Tantiya Tope and Chakhi Khuntia were leading the mutiny. For some time, Bahadur Shah Zafar was the unanimously accepted ornamental leader.

Two French historians Kay and Malleson have written, "Discontent has invaded all classes of the Indian population, they are going to make common cause with the Sepoys". In other words, British rule and its forceful ways of exploitation and torture had already sowed the seeds of hatred and anguish in the minds of the people.

The first Great War of India's Independence in 1857 was won by the British yet it resulted in a change of mindset for the British introduced a host of policy changes. Social welfare, which was never given importance till then, somehow got a fillip. In another sense this war also strengthened the resolve of the British to subjugate this vast nation for as long as possible. At a social level, Hindus and Muslims for the first time had fought for a common cause. Parsis, Sikhs, Marathas and Sindhis had joined hands. India had become united.

No doubt, thousands were killed, hundreds were exiled and deported, villages were ravaged, properties were destroyed and the iron hand of the British was truly all pervasive. This war did not result in India's Independence, yet people were united in their fight against the mighty empire. Today, as we celebrate our first War of Independence, we salute all those who inspired the uprising starting from Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey displayed immense courage to fight against the mighty British for the sake of the country's freedom. We also salute all those who bravely fought only to sacrifice their lives to the bullets of the British. We salute those who taught us unity.

Today we celebrate the 150th year of India's First War of Independence. I join millions of my countrymen in paying tribute to the heroes of that Great War. The history of that war will continue to inspire generations of Indians. People who are enjoying life in a free India need to salute all those whose free spirit shook the backbone of the British Empire.

Today, we have wars of a different kind on our hands. We have to win the war against illiteracy, malnutrition, unemployment and poverty. We have to win the war against AIDS and Tuberculosis. We have to win the war against social discrimination and gender bias. We also have to win the war against child labour, bonded labour and dowry. I have never been a pessimist and strongly believe that the situation will change for the better, and sooner than we can imagine. With millions of young men and women spreading their wings and with a rapidly growing economy, this great nation is destined to lead the world. Those of us who are better placed either in the public sector or private sector should come forward and join hands to improve the socio-economic condition of others less privileged. The Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi dreamt of a free India where there would be equal opportunities for every body. Gandhiji was moved by seeing the poverty in Orissa and said, "The famine - stricken skeletons of men and women in Orissa haunt me in my waking hours and in my dreams. Whatever can be useful to those starving millions is beautiful to my mind. Let us give today first the vital things of life and all the graces and ornaments of life will follow."

Orissa despite being culturally rich and wealthy in mineral wealth and natural resources is among the poorest states in the country. There is no time to lose. With massive planned industrialization, the State is now on the fast track to economic growth. But economic growth can have no meaning unless it drives away dire poverty. There is no equality without equitable growth. The fruits of development must reach the poorest.

True freedom is thus freedom from hunger, fear and want. The government must do its best. And to do its best it must remove corruption and increase transparency, accountability, credibility and efficiency. It must ensure that for every rupee it spends a citizen reaps the benefit of two rupees. Economic growth and human rights growth must march together. Globalisation must go hand in hand with poverty alleviation. The private sector can contribute by setting excellent educational institutions and universities, state-of-the-art hospitals besides enhancing employment. NGOs and the civil society must ceaselessly work to secure the human rights of every citizen. The media has also a very significant and positive role to play. But above all, the community must get together to

solve its problems and take its members ahead on the path of peace, progress and prosperity. India is not only the largest and strongest but also the most vibrant multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual democracy. 62 tribes including 13 primitive tribes in Orissa reflect our multi-ethnicity. India is thus naturally a people's democracy more than a market democracy.

Once again, I pay my sincere tributes to the heroes of 1857 War of Independence and hope the legacy will continue to inspire this great nation.

I again thank all those who have contributed to make today's function a great success.

Jai Hind.