

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Popular Uprisings in the 18th and 19th Centuries - Politico-Religious Movements [NCERT Notes]

The British gradually established their political and economic hegemony over large parts of India after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. This resulted in the disruption in the old way of life and all sections of society were affected by it. Changes were seen in the economic, social, religious and political spheres of life. This resulted in many people getting stripped off their traditional rights and privileges and also saw many people sink into debt and poverty. This led to many uprisings against the British and also sometimes against the Indian landlords by peasants and tribals. Many rebellions were also led by landlords and deposed chieftains against the British. The popular uprisings can be classified into:

- Peasant rebellions
- Tribal movements
- Movements by the deposed chieftains/landlords
- Politico-Religious Movements

Politico-Religious Movements

These movements had a religious framework although political and economic reasons were also responsible for them. The main politico-religious movements are as follows.

Sanyasi Uprising (1770-1820's)

- In Hinduism, a Sanyasi is a person who has renounced the world and is free from all attachments and worldly desires.
- The Sanyasis who had revolted against the English in the 18th century were not necessarily men who had renounced the world. There were many sects of Sanyasis who travelled from northern India to various religious places and shrines in Bengal.
- Some of the Sanyasis were naga sadhus, i.e., ascetics who had renounced clothes. But some others were people who wore clothes and were also permitted to marry.
- The British were wary of these wandering men and called them by various epithets like 'erratic beggars', 'gypsies of Hindusthan', 'lawless mendicants', 'religious vagrants', etc.
- After the British had acquired revenue rights in Bengal, many zamindars there had fallen upon hard times owing to the steep tax rates.
- It was the practice of the Sanyasis to collect alms and contributions from these zamindars during their religious travels. This was stopped when the zamindars found it too difficult to provide alms, since after paying the British their due, they were hardly left with anything substantial.
- The British considered the Sanyasis looters and imposed restrictions on the Sanyasis barring them from visiting holy places.
- The Sanyasis rose in rebellion against the British and raided English factories and government treasuries.
- This rebellion was centred in the forests of Murshidabad and Baikunthapur, Bengal.

- In 1771, 150 unarmed sanyasis were killed under the orders of Warren Hastings.
- The Sanyasi uprising went on for about 50 years and was suppressed completely only in the 1820's.
- Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel Anandamath, written in 1882, was set in the backdrop of the Sanyasi Rebellion. This book was banned by the British. India's National Song 'Vande Mataram' was taken from this novel.

Fakir Uprising (1776-77)

- Fakir uprising was started after the British annexation of Bengal by Fakirs or wandering Muslim mendicants.
- They were led by Majnu Shah.
- He defied the British authority and began to levy taxes on the farmers and zamindars in Bengal.
- They looted English factories acquiring cash, arms and ammunitions.
- Majnu Shah was supported by Rajputs, Pathans and disbanded Indian soldiers.
- After Majnu Shah's death, his brother Chirag Shah led the operations.
- Other notable leaders of the uprising were Bhavani Pathak and Devi Chaudhurani.

Pagal Panthi Revolt (1825 – 1850's)

- The Pagal Panthis were a religious order founded by Karim Shah in the Mymensingh and Sherpur districts of Bengal.
- The order's philosophy was that of religious harmony and non-violence incorporating tenets of Sufism, Hinduism and animism.
- Under Karim Shah's son Tipu Shah, the order revolted against the British government by organising peasant rebellions.
- They were against the oppressive tax regime of the British.
- Tipu Shah captured Sherpur in 1825 and practically ruled over the Sherpur and Mymensingh areas. Disturbances continued till the 1850's.

Faraizi Revolt (1838 – 1857)

- The Faraizis were followers of a Muslim sect founded by Haji Shariatullah.
- It spread to Faridpur, Bakarganj and Mymensingh districts of Bengal.
- This movement supported the cause of the tenants against the landlords and the British government.
- It was led by Shariatullah's son Dadu Mian.

Kuka Revolt (1871 – 71)

- The Kukas, also called Namdharis, were a sect within Sikhism.
- They started out as a group for religious purification in Sikhism but under Ram Singh the movement acquired a political overtone with the established aim of restoring Sikh rule in Punjab and ousting the foreign powers.
- The Kukas wore only white, hand-woven clothes and boycotted British education, products and laws.

- In 1872, Ram Singh was captured and exiled to Rangoon and 65 Kukas were blown away from canons by the British.

