
UNIT 14: UPRISING OF 1857

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In the earlier Units you have already been familiarised with the various aspects relating to Imperialism and Colonialism. You are aware that during the period of its rule over the country the East India Company exploited and harassed the Indian people. Although various sections of Indian people defied the English supremacy at different times, it was the great uprising of 1857, often termed as the First War of Independence that posed a serious challenge to the English supremacy at an all India level. After reading this unit you will be able to:

trace the causes of the uprising of 1857,

- know about the various events and conflicts and about the role of various sections of people as well as their leaders,
- determine the reasons for the failure of the revolt,
- and understand its impact and form an opinion about the nature of the revolt.
- the progress of the revolt between May and June'57 and the months thereafter
- the intensity of the revolt even after the fall of Delhi in September 1857,
- the institutions that the rebels evolved,
- the efforts that went into its suppression,
- the post-'57 restructuring of agrarian relations, and
- Colonial policy towards' princes and Muslims.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The revolt of 1857 forms one of the most important chapters in the history of the struggle of the Indian people for liberation from the British rule. It shook the foundations of the British Empire in India and at some points it seemed as though the British rule would end for all time to come. What started merely as a sepoy mutiny soon engulfed the peasantry and other civilian population over wide areas in northern India. The upsurge was so widespread that some of the contemporary observers called it - a - "national revolt". The hatred of the people for the ferangis was intense and bitter. Between May and June 1857 it was only some beleaguered cities like Agra, Lucknow, Allahabad and Benares that kept alive evidence of British presence in north India. By then the revolt had spread to Awadh, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, Bihar and many parts of central India. This Unit introduces you to the pattern of the progress of the revolt, its manifestations not only in terms of the destruction of symbols of colonial authority but rebel institutions that followed the outbreak.

14.2 CAUSES OF 1857

How did the Revolt break out? What were its causes? The main reason of this was the ruthless exploitation of the Indian people by the British. The British rule which was formally established after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 in Bengal, strove to fill the coffers of the East India Company at the expense of the Indians. The East India Company was governed by greedy merchants and traders who could go to any extent to enrich themselves.

14.2.1 Exploitation of the Peasantry

Although the trade monopoly enriched the East India Company considerably, its main source of income was now derived from the land. After entrenching itself in Bengal, it spread its power in India through wars and treaties. To extract as much money as possible it devised new systems of land settlements - Permanent, Ryotwari and Mahalwari -each more oppressive than the other. The Permanent Settlement which was effective in Bengal Presidency and in large parts of north India did not recognise the hereditary rights of the peasants on land, which they had earlier enjoyed. The loyal zamindars and revenue-collectors were now given the proprietary rights on land. The cultivators were reduced to the status of simple tenants. But even the newly created landlords were not given absolute rights. Their situation was also deliberately left very precarious. They had to pay to the Company 10/1 lth of the entire rent derived from the cultivators and if they failed to do so, their property was sold to others. The other land settlements were no better. In all of these the peasants had to pay beyond their means and any adverse natural shifts like droughts or flood compelled them to go for loans to the money lenders who charged exorbitant interest. This made the peasants so heavily indebted that they were ultimately forced to sell their land to these money lenders. It is because of this that the money lenders were so hated in rural society. The peasantry was also oppressed by petty officials in administration who extracted money on the slightest pretexts. If the peasants went to the law court to seek redress of their grievances, they were bound to be totally ruined. When the crop was good the peasants had to pay back their past debts; if it was bad, they were further indebted. This nexus between the lower officials, law courts and money lenders created a vicious circle which made the peasantry desperate and ready to welcome any opportunity for change of regime.

14.2.2 Annexation of Princely States

The East India Company did not spare even its former allies. The native state of Awadh was annexed by Dalhousie in 1856 on the pretext that Nawab Wazid Ali Shah was mismanaging the state. Even before this he had annexed Satara in 1848 and Nagpur and Jhansi in 1854 on the pretext that the rulers of these states had no natural heir to succeed them after their death. These annexations embittered the rulers of these states, making Rani of Jhansi and Begums of Awadh staunch enemies of the British. Further the British refusal to pay pension to Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao I worsened the situation. The annexation of Awadh was also resented by the sepoys as most of who came from there. This action hurt their patriotic loyalty and sense of dignity. Moreover, since their relatives had now to pay more taxes on land, it adversely affected the purses of the sepoys themselves.

14.2.3 The Alien Rule

Another important reason of the unpopularity of the British was the alien nature of their rule. They never mixed with the Indian people and treated even the upper class Indians with contempt. They had not come to settle in India but only to take money home. So the Indians could never develop any affinity towards them.

14.2.4 Impact on the Sepoys

The revolt of 1857 originated with the mutiny of the Sepoys. These Sepoys were drawn mainly from the peasant population of North and North-West India. As we have seen, the rapacious policies followed by the East India Company were impoverishing and ruining the peasantry. This must have affected the Sepoys also. Infact, most of them had joined the military service in order to supplement their fast declining agricultural income. But as the years passed, they realised that their capacity for doing so declined. They were paid a monthly salary of 7 to 9 Rupees out of which they had to pay for their food, uniform and transport of their private baggage. The cost of maintaining an Indian Sepoy was only one-third of his British counterpart in India. Moreover, the Indian Sepoy was treated roughly by the British officers. They were frequently abused and humiliated. The Indian Sepoy, despite his valour and great fighting capacity could never rise above the rank of a *Subedar* while a fresh recruit from England was often appointed his superior overnight.

14.2.5 Threat to Religion

Apart from degrading service conditions, another factor inflamed the feelings of the sepoys. An impression was created among them that their religion was being attacked by the British. This belief was also shared by the general civilian population. The proselytizing zeal of the missionaries and some of the British officials instilled fear in the minds of the people that their religion was in danger. At several places conversions to Christianity were reported to be made. The Government maintained the chaplains at its own cost and in some cases also provided police protection to the missionaries. Even the army maintained chaplains at state cost and Christian propaganda was carried among the sepoys. Furthermore, the sepoys were forbidden to wear their caste marks, and in 1856 an Act was passed under which every new recruit had to give an undertaking to serve overseas, if required. The conservative beliefs of the sepoys were thus shaken and they sometimes reacted strongly. For example in 1824, the 47th Regiment of sepoys at Barrackpore refused to go to Burma by sea-route because their religion forbade them to cross "black water". The British reacted ruthlessly, disbanded the Regiment, and put some of its leaders to death. In 1844, seven battalions revolted on the question of salaries and batta (allowance). Even during the Afghan War from 1839 to 1842 the soldiers were almost on the verge of revolt The Revolt of 1857. Like sepoys, the people of India had also risen in revolt against the oppressive British rule. The most important of these uprisings

were the Kutcha rebellion (1816-32), the Kol uprising in 1831 and the Santhal uprising in 1855-56. The main point with regard to the 1857 challenge, however, was that both the military and civilian revolts merged and this made it really formidable.

14.2.6 The Immediate Cause

The atmosphere was so surcharged that even a small issue could lead to revolt. The episode of greased cartridges, however, was a big enough issue to start the rebellion on its own. Dry tinder-box was there and only a spark was needed to set it ablaze. Cartridges of the new Enfield rifle which had recently been introduced in the army had a greased paper cover whose end had to be bitten off-before the cartridge was loaded into rifle. The grease was in some instances made of beef and pig fat. This completely enraged the Hindu and Muslim sepoys and made them believe that the government was deliberately trying to destroy their religion. It was the immediate cause of the revolt

14.3 EMERGENCE OF REVOLT

On 29th March, 1857, a young soldier, Mangal Pandey, stationed at Barrackpore, revolted single-handedly attacking his British officers. He was hanged, and not much notice was taken of this event. But it showed the resentment and anger aroused among the sepoys. Less than a month later, on 24th April, ninety men of the Third Native Cavalry, stationed at Meerut, refused to use the greased cartridges. Eighty-five of them were dismissed and sentenced to ten years imprisonment on 9th May. The rest of the Indian sepoys reacted strongly to this, and the next day, on 10th May, the entire Indian garrison revolted. After freeing their comrades and killing the British officers, they decided to march on to Delhi. This shows that they did have in mind some sort of alternative to the British. Another thing which makes it clear that it was not merely army mutiny was that the people from surrounding areas began to loot the military bazaars and attacked and burnt the bungalows of the British as soon as they heard the shots fired by the sepoys on their officers. The Gujars from the surrounding villages poured into the city and joined the revolt. Telegraph wires were cut and horsemen with warning messages to Delhi were intercepted. As soon as the sepoys from Meerut reached Delhi, the Indian garrison also revolted and joined the rebels. They now proclaimed the old Bahadur Shah, as the Emperor of India. Thus in twenty-four hours. What began as a simple mutiny had swelled into full-scale political rebellion. In the next one month the entire Bengal Army rose in revolt. Whole of North and North West India was up in arms against the British. In Aligarh, Mainpuri, Bulandshahr, Etawah, Mathura. Agra. Lucknow, Allahabad, Banaras, Shahabad, Danapur and East Punjab, wherever there were Indian troops, they revolted. With the revolt in army, the police and local administration also collapsed. These revolts were also immediately followed by a rebellion in the city and countryside. But in several places the people rose in revolt even before the sepoys. Wherever revolt broke out, the government treasury was plundered, the magazine sacked, bar'racks and court houses were burnt and prison gates flung

open. In the countryside, the peasants and dispossessed zamindars attacked the money lenders and new zamindars that had displaced them from the land. They destroyed the government records and money lenders' account books. They attacked the British established law courts, revenue offices, revenue records and *thanas* (police stations). Thus the rebels tried to destroy all the symbols of colonial power. Even when the people of particular areas did not rise in revolt, they offered their help and sympathies to the rebels. It was said that the rebellious sepoys did not have to carry food with them as they were fed by the villagers. On the other hand, their hostility to the British forces was pronounced. They refused to give them any help or information and on many occasions they misled the British troops by giving wrong information. In central India also, where the rulers remained loyal to the British, the army revolted and joined the rebels. Thousands of Indore's troops joined in Indore the rebellious sepoys. Similarly, over 20,000 of Gwalior's troops went over to Tantya Tope and Rani of Jhansi. In the whole of north and central India the British power was limited only to the towns of Agra, and Lucknow. Elsewhere the entire British army and administration fell like a house of cards. One of the most remarkable thing about the rebellion was its solid Hindu-Muslim unity. The Hindu sepoys of Meerut and Delhi unanimously proclaimed Bahadur Shah as their Emperor. All the sepoys, whether Hindu or Muslim accepted the suzerainty of the Emperor and gave the call "chalo Delhi" (onward to Delhi) after their revolt. w- Hindus and Muslims fought together and died together. Wherever the sepoys reached, cow-slaughter was banned as a mark of respect to the sentiments of the Hindus.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How and by which sections was the Peasantry exploited? Write in ten lines.

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- 2) Read the following statements and mark them right (✓) or wrong (X).

- i) The Peasants joined the zamindars in fighting the British.
- ii) The Sepoys perceived a threat to their religion by the British rule.
- iii) The middle and upper class Indians were the beneficiaries of British rule.
- iv) The exploitation of the most sections of the Indians was the long standing reason but the episode of greased cartridges provided the immediate reason for the revolt to break out

3) Write in about fifty words when, where and how the uprising started.

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14.4 COURSE OF THE REVOLT

In 1857 there were some 45,000 European and some 232,000 regular troops in India. The bulk of European units were concentrated as an army of occupation in the recently conquered Punjab. Thus between Calcutta and Delhi there were only 5 European regiments. On May 11 the Meerut Mutineers crossed over to Delhi and appealed to Bahadur Shah 11, the pensioner Mughal emperor to lead them and proclaimed him Shahenshah-Hindustan. By the first week of June mutinies had broken out in Aligarh, Mainpuri, Bulandshahr, Etawah, Mathura, Lucknow, Bareilly, Kanpur, Jhansi, Nimach, Moradabad, Saharanpur etc. By mid-June and September 1857 there had been mutinies in Gwalior, Mhow and Sialkot and in Bihar, in Danapur, Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Bhagalpur, and Nagode and Jabalpur in central India.

By September-October it was clear that the revolt would not spill across the Narmada. North of the Narmada the main axis of the revolt was represented by the river Ganga and the Grand Trunk Road between Delhi and Patna.

14.4.1 Revolt of the Army

It is important to note that a mere chronology of the mutinies conceals their pattern of diffusion. The mutinies travelled down the Ganga from Meerut and Delhi with a time gap between the various stations required for news to travel from one place to another. There were rumours that 30th May 1857 was the day fixed for a total destruction of white men all over north India. Just as news of the fall of Delhi had precipitated the revolt of the army and civil population, the fall of Lucknow in end of May set off uprisings in the district stations of 'Awadh. There is evidence of a certain element of coordination and communication (response to pre appointed signals etc.) among the mutinous regiments and in their actions though the coordinators themselves remained anonymous. The transmission of rumours (about rebel and British activity) and panic (about religion), which acted as springboards of action was facilitated by the fact that many soldiers were recruited from the same region. Awadh. The pattern of the

mutinies was the destruction of houses used or lived in by the British and the government treasures and jails. In Awadh the sepoys claimed that *Telinga Raj* (sepoys Raj - see Key Words) had arrived.

14.4.2 Revolt of the People

Chapaties were passed from village to village during the winter of 1856-7; it had different meanings for different people. Though by no means a cause of the disturbance, it was perceived as a message of an imminent holocaust. Rumours of greased cartridges, flour polluted with bone, and forcible conversion to Christianity transformed popular grievances against the British into a revolt.

In several places people collected, conferred and planned their attack on government and bahia property. People of neighbouring villages, after connected by kinship and caste ties, got together to make such attacks. Sadar stations were often attacked by people from anything between 30 to 60 villages. The pattern of attack was the same everywhere. Scores were settled with tax collectors, court officials, policemen and *bantias*. Treasuries were looted, prisoners set free and bungalows set on fire. Clearly the rebels gave priority to political considerations and did not hesitate to destroy economic resources. For example, the coal mines in Kotah were damaged, canal Pock were destroyed to prevent a British battalion reaching Bulandshahr by boat. Similarly numerous attacks were also made on railways and factories by the United Provinces' rural poor who were dependent on them for their livelihood. In the course of the suppression of the revolt what struck the British was the remarkable solidarity among rebels. Most often pecuniary rewards could not induce betrayal, nor could they play off Hindu against Muslims.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Comment briefly on the geographical extent of the revolt of 1857.
Answer in 5 lines.

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2. Mark the main rebel centres on a map of India.

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14.5 REBEL INSTITUTIONS

That the revolt of 1857 went beyond overthrowing the British is borne out by the

Organizational effects of the rebels:

- immediately after the capture of Delhi, a letter was sent to rulers of all the neighbouring states of present day Rajasthan soliciting their support,
- in Delhi, a court of administrators was set up. Of the 10 members 6 were from the army and four from other departments. Decisions were taken by majority vote.

Such attempts at organization were made at other centres too. We have supportive details from Awadh where Birjis Qadar, a minor, was crowned price by consensus, immediately after the British defeat at the battle of Chinhat on 30th June 1857. The rebels laid down conditions such as:

- orders from Delhi were to be obeyed
- the wazir would be selected by the army and
- officers of the army would be appointed after the consent of the army.

The Awadh rebel executive structure comprised two separate decision-making bodies:

- one consisting of bureaucrats and court officials to see to organization and payments,
- the 'military cell' composed of sepoys or rebel soldiers and a few court officials

It is significant that at this early stage of the revolt, around July 1857, there was no *talukdar* in any important decision-making body. In fact orders were issued to *talukdars* and zamindars, with promises of land or revenue, asking them to join the revolt to end British rule.

Notwithstanding occasional divisions in the rebel ranks, as for example between the followers of Birjis Qadar and Maulvi Ahmadullah in Awadh, it is the efforts

to maintain a semblance of organisation that is remarkable. Guidelines were laid down for sepoys and commanders for their operations. Efforts were made for the regular payment of rebel troops either by the conversion of ornaments into coins or granting remission of revenue to talukdars for them to pay the troops.

14.6 SUPPRESSION AND REPRESSION OF THE COLONIAL STATE

Isolated outbreaks that had occurred in as distant places as Peshawar, Singapore, Kolhapur, Chittagong and Madras were put down with ease. By early July with the core area of the revolt emerging clearly, the British moved in to mop it up. About 39,000 troops were shipped, on request from London to lead the suppression operation. By the end of November 37 troopships crammed the Hughli.

By mid-August the mutineers were driven out of Arrah, Gaya, and Hazaribagh in Bihar. Delhi fell on 21st September after an attack with heavy casualties. Thereafter many rebels shifted to Lucknow. In Awadh, Lucknow was the chief focus of fighting. Rebels were supplied with ammunition from the districts and a workshop was set up in Faizabad to repair heavy guns. Many talukdars fought personally. According to one estimate 100,000 of the 150,000 who died in Awadh were civilians. After the fall of Lucknow in March 1858, the rebels dispersed into the countryside and enclaves of resistance emerged to the south and south-east and the west and north-west of Lucknow. Till September-October 1858 the rebels believed that one combined, well planned attack could still dislodge the British from Awadh and tried to coordinate campaigns in this direction.

- Prominent among the leaders of the revolt were
- the Rani of Jhansi who died fighting in June 1858,
- Nana Saheb, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II, who led the mutiny at Kanpur and escaped to Nepal in the beginning of 1859,
- Kuer Singh of Arrah who had carved a base of himself in Azamgarh and Ghazipur and died fighting in May 1858.
- Begum Hazrat Mahal who escaped to Nepal,
- Maulvi Ahmadullah who carried on the revolt around the borders of Awadh and Rohilkhand till his death in June 1858,
- Tantia Tope, uprooted from his base on the Jumna at Kalpi, reached Gwalior in

June 1858, crossed the Narmada in October and was captured and put to death in

1859.

For more than a year the rebels had struggled with limited supply of arms and ammunitions and a poor system of communication. Many sepoys were amazed at the resources of the British and had expected that the British would need French help to put them down. On their part, the British surrounded Awadh, tackled Delhi and the Jumuna area, and then concentrated on Awadh.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Give two examples of rebel institutions with brief details.

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- 2) To what extent does the defence of Lucknow indicate the intensity of the revolt? Answer in 50 words.

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14.7 AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLT

The suppression of the revolt of 1857 was accomplished by a two pronged approach of military strategy and the submission of *talukdars*. The reassertion of British control was thereafter reinforced with princely support based on an assurance of non-interference in adoption question.

14.7.1 Landlords

In the North Western Provinces the British made widespread confiscation and redistribution of land. Some incomplete figures show that land assessed at Rs. 17 lakhs was confiscated and land assessed at Rs. 9 lakhs was given in reward. In making land rewards it was the larger landholders who were preferred.

After the fall of Lucknow a proclamation was issued confiscating proprietary right in land in the whole of Awadh except six specific estates. Some 22,658 out of 23,543 villages were restored to *talukdars* in return for submission and loyalty in the form of collection and transmission and loyalty in the form of collection and transmission of information. Village proprietors in Awadh were to remain under-proprietors or tenants-at-will. There was, however, fierce opposition to the *talukdari* settlement among the villagers in several Awadh districts in 1859-60. Faced with agrarian strife the government had to limit the rental demand of the *talukdars* against inferior holders to a fixed amount (1866). It was also decided that underproprietary rights enjoyed at any time during 12 years prior to annexation were to be protected.

14.7.2 Princes

It may be recalled that the British policy of annexing states had been one of the many accumulating grievances as is evident both from the leadership provided to the rebels by the Rani of Jhansi, Nana Saheb and Begum Hazarat Mahal, and the proclamations of the rebels.

At one point during the revolt Canning had observed that had it not been for the 'patches of native government' like Gwalior, Hyderabad, Patiala, Rampur and Rewa serving as 'break-waters to the storm of 1857' the British would have been swept away.

Therefore, the Queen's proclamation of 1858 declared that the British had no desire to extend their existing territorial possessions. To perpetuate dynasties Canning dispensed with the doctrine of lapse and allowed all rulers the right of adoption.

Territorial and monetary awards were bestowed on princes who had remained loyal i.e. those of Gwalior, Rampur, Patiala and Jind.

In 1861 a special order of knighthood, the star of India, was instituted, of which the recipients were the rulers of Baroda, Bhopal, Gwalior, Patiala and Rampur.

However, if the princes were given security from annexation it was made clear that in the event of 'misgovernment' or 'anarchy' the British would step in to take temporary charge of a native state.

14.7.3 The Army

A despatch from Charles Wood, Secretary of State for India to Canning in 1861 sums up the thrust of British policy towards the army in the post-mutiny years. 'If one regiment mutinies I should like to have the next regiment so alien that it would be ready to fire into it.'

Soldiers from Awadh, Bihar and Central India were declared to be non-martial and their recruitment cut down considerably.

Sikhs, Gurkhas and Pathans who assisted in the suppression of the revolt were declared to be martial and were recruited in large numbers. Briefly, community,

caste, tribal and regional loyalties were encouraged so as to obstruct the forging of the solidarity that was evident among the sepoys from Awadh in 1857.

14.7.4 British Policy After Revolt

In 1858, as a consequence of the revolt of 1857, a Government of India Act abolished the East India Company. India was to be governed directly in the name of the Crown of England. The November 1858 royal proclamation gave out:

- that those who laid down arms by 2 January 1859 would be pardoned except those directly involved in the murder of British subjects,
- that official service would be open to all and
- due regard would be given to ancient usages and customs of India.

To the British, the appeal to Bahadur Shah II to head the revolt was confirmation of the theory of a Muslim plot to restore the Mughal regime at Delhi. This belief in official circles in fact explains the official attitude towards the community in the post-revolt years.

So marked was the anti-Muslim attitude that Saiyid Ahmad Khan felt the need to write a pamphlet titled 'who were the Loyal Musalmans?' In that he quoted numerous instances of Muslim collaboration with the British.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) How did the British tackle the landlord rebels? Answer in 5 lines.

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- 2) Comment on the change in British policy towards the native states after the revolt. Answer in 50 words.

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- 3) Explain British attitudes towards the Muslims after the revolt. Answer in 50 words.

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14.8 LET US SUM UP

This Unit tried to establish that

- the core area of the revolt was to the north of the Narmada,
- there was a pattern in the diffusion of the revolt down the Ganga,
- the pattern of revolt in the army and of the people,
- all was not chaos when the rebels took over,
- it took the British a year to suppress the revolt.

The events of 1857, which we have discussed in the Unit are important not only because they represented the crystallisation of popular feelings against the alien rule but also because of the many changes that they produced in the country. These changes pertained not only to the policy formulation and the political structure but also to popular beliefs, ideas, and attitude regarding the nature of British rule. The invincibility of the British rule was shattered once for all and the stage was set for an organised and long drawn out struggle against the alien rule. This led to the beginning of the National Movement which ultimately, ended the foreign rule and brought independence to the country in 1947. After 1858 the British saw themselves with a 'halo of permanence', ruling with the strength of having overcome a revolt of the dimensions discussed above.

14.9 KEY WORDS

Bania - Money-lender

Ilaqa - Area of land

Lineage - Ancestral

Pattidar - Joint ownership of village

Talukdar - Holder of a taluk (estate in which the holder is responsible for revenue collection from a number of dependent villages)

Telinga Raj - originates from the practice of calling sepoy's Telingas from the time Clive brought Telugu speaking sepoy's from Madras in 1756-7.

14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) (a) ✓ (b) ✓ (c) x (d) ✓

2) See Sub Sec. 14.2.1 3) See Sub Sec. 14.3

Check Your Progress 2

1) See Sec. 14.3

2) In an outline Map of India mark the places

Check Your Progress 3

1) See Sec. 14.5

2) See Sec. 14.6

Check Your Progress 4

1) See Sub-sec. 14.7.1

2) See Sub-sec. 14.7.2

3) See Sub-sec. 14.7.4