

# Causes of the American War of Independence

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# Introduction



The American Revolution, culminating in the American war of Independence, was a momentous happening in the world history as it marked the first successful struggle for freedom and liberty in modern history. The ideas and ideals born out of the War of Independence influenced not only the French Revolution of 1789 and the English Liberal Radical Movement of the 19th century, but almost all the subsequent struggles for freedom and liberty.

JOHN ADAMS, the second President of the United States, in a reminiscent letter written in his later years, viewed that the history of the American Revolution began as early as 1629. He asserted that the Revolution had affected much before the war commenced. He added, "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people..... The principles and feelings which led the Americans to rebel out to be traced back for two hundred years and sought in the history of the country from the first plantation in America."

In a practical sense, the over parting of ways between England and America began in 1763. By this time, remarkable changes had taken place since the first settlement at JAMESTOWN, VIRGINIA, more than 150 years .ago. Several colonies had grown in economic strength and cultural attainments. All of them gained considerable experience in self government. This brings to the fundamental causes of the American war of Independence.

## Causes & Fundamental

The Thirteen Colonies were composed of people who developed an independent attitude. The Englishmen who left England and settled in these colonies had not much of goodwill for England. It was religious persecution that forced many English Protestants during the reigns of Mary Tudor, James I and Charles I to leave the shores of England and settle down in these new lands. Similarly, the Catholics in England fed up with the disabilities forced upon them in the 17th century left England and settled in these colonies. Moreover, as there was a lot of arable land and as the number of settlers was small, the Crown's Government encouraged even outsiders to settle in these colonies. Thus, in course of time, a good number of the Dutch, the Spaniards, the Danes, the Italians and others settled in these colonies, and these people did not have any love for England.



The struggle against hardship, in the new environment instilled a spirit of adventure and a sense of liberty among the settlers. Gradually, they had more of democracy and liberty than the Englishmen had in their own country. England presented a picture of a conservative society bound by tradition and respectability, while the colonies gave the impression of a vigorous, tradition-free and forward - looking society. Moreover, in England, aristocracy dominated in politics. The colonists, on the other hand, showed the emergence of ordinary folks in politics. They possessed a pioneering spirit and their assemblies were more vigorous and independent. The seeds of separation from the mother-country lay in this spirit of independence.

Again, the long distance and the lack of speedy means of transport and communication had their share in the American Revolution. The means of transport and communication were so much primitive in those days that there was very little contact between England and the colonies, and the British government failed to exercise any effective control over the colonies.

The system of government of the colonies also facilitated the feeling of hostility between the mother-country and the colonies. Colonies were governed by Governors, Captains and Colonels, all nominated by the British government. The colonies had legislatures, but the governors were not responsible to them. The recurring clash between the provincial governors, the symbol of monarchical power and external control and the Legislative Assembly, the symbol of local autonomy and democratic principle, helped to awaken colonial sense towards the divergence

between American and English interests. The British Parliament was too not very interested in the affairs of the colonies. However, the irresistible altitude of the colonial legislatures sometimes aroused sentiment in England and this led to efforts by the Parliament or the Crown to subordinate more effectively the economic activities and government of the colonies to England's will and interest. But the majority of the colonies were opposed to such subordination. And the thought of a three thousand mile sea between the new world and the mother-country served merely as a tranquilising influence upon any fears of vengeance for disobedience that the colonies might have had. The question was frequently raised as to whether the British Parliament had the right to tax the colonies or to legislate for them. In theory, such a right did exist, but in practice the colonies resisted this claim of the British government. As time went on, the assemblies took over the functions of the governors, and the whole centre of gravity of colonial administration shifted from London to the capitals of the American Colonies.

Again, the colonies detested the economic exploitation involved in the old colonial system which was based on the principle that "the colonies existed for the mother country". The trade and industries of the colonies were regulated in the interests of the mother country. The NAVIGATION ACTS and TRADE ACTS passed by the British Parliament, put many restrictions on the trade and industry of the colonies. The colonists detested restrictions on their imports and exports.

Of course, it must be noted that although the colonies hated the regulations imposed by the British government, they did not suffer due to regulations as the latter existed merely on paper and the British government made no effort to enforce them in the first half of the 18th century. The colonists carried on their trade with other countries in spite of the laws. For example, the MOLASSES ACT, passed in 1733, was defied by the colonies from the very beginning. But the SEVEN YEARS' WAR (1756-63) brought a qualitative change in the situation.

## Causes - Immediate

The SEVEN YEARS' WAR (1753-63) led to a chain of events that drove the colonies towards the struggle for independence. Till the Seven Years' War, the colonies were sticking on the England because they were not in a position to defend themselves against the French in Canada. They had to depend on the mother country for protection. But with the defeat of the French in the war, that danger was over. The attitude of the colonists towards the mother country so radically changed as to amount to a policy of defiance. A French contemporary aptly commented, "England will soon repent of having removed the only check that could keep her colonies in awe" In fact, MONTCALM prophesied shortly before his death that conquest of Canada would be followed by a revolt in the English colonies. HIS prophecy came out to be true. As Prot. Pollard viewed, "the conquest of Canada led to the loss of the 13 American colonies, their original bias towards separation had never been eradicated and the recurrent quarrels between the various legislatures and their Governors had only been prevented from coming to a head by fear of the Frenchmen at their gates and disunion among themselves."

Moreover, England had spent a lot of money on the defense of her colonies in North America during the Seven Years' war. The situation was so critical in 1763 that there was an imminent danger of financial crisis. The British statement held that as England had spent a lot of money on the defense of these colonies, the colonies must make some contributions and thus help the mother-country. But the colonies were reluctant to lessen the burden of the mother country. They not only refused to share her past burdens, but also showed reluctance to contribute towards the defense of the colonies in future.

The need for revenue compelled King GEORGE III and his ministers to resort to measures that would bring the reluctant colonies in line. This provided the immediate cause of the war. When Lord GRANVILLE came to power in 1763, he decided to thoroughly go into the matter of financial relationship of the 13 colonies with the mother-country. He found the entire system to have been in a mess and was determined to overhaul it.

The first step in the way of the new system was the passing of the SUGAR ACT (1764), which simply put a modest duty on molasses from all sources and also levied duties on wines, silks, coffee and some luxury items. It was not so much the new duties that caused consternation among New England merchants. It was rather the fact that steps were being taken to enforce them effectively - an entirely new development. The power of parliament to tax colonial commodities for the regulation of Imperial trade had been long accepted in theory,

but not in practice. JAMES OTIS, an early patriot recorded, "one single act of Parliament has set more people thinking in six months, more than they had done in their whole lives before. "Merchants, legislatures and town meetings protested against the expediency of the law, and colonial lawyers like SAMUEL ADAMS found In the Act the first intimation of 'No Taxation without Representation'— the catch-word which would draw so many people to the cause of patriots against the mother-country.

To add fuel to the simmering revolutionary fire, Parliament enacted two more acts - the CURRENCY ACT and the BILLETING ACT, both in 1765. The first prevented paper bills issued in the colonies from being used in the colonies from being made legal tender; it was a serious blow to the colonial economy. The second act compelled the colonies to provide quarters and supplies for the maintenance of the British troops.

But it was the last of Grenville's measures the famous STAMP ACT (1765) - That would arouse the most vehement opposition in the colonies, it provided that revenue stamps be affixed to all newspapers. Pamphlet licenses, leases or other legal documents. The revenue, thus obtained, would be spent for the Sole purpose of "defending, protecting and securing" the colonies. Only American were to be appointed as collectors of the tax and there was hardly any controversial point about this Act of Parliament. But so violent was its reaction in all the 13 colonies that it astonished the moderate men everywhere. Notably it aroused the hostility of the most powerful and the most articulate groups in the colonies - the lawyer's journalists. Clergymen, merchants and businessmen, all those who would be affected by the Act. Business came almost to a standstill and trade with mother-country fell off considerably in the summer of 1765.

An organization called SONS OF LIBERTY was launched, and crowds took out processions in Boston and other cities, From Massachusetts to South Carolina, the Act was nullified, and mobs forced reckless agents to resign their offices and destroyed the hate? stamps, The great significance of the stamp Act lay alone in its participation of the American Revolution; the Virginia Assembly, for example, passed a set of resolutions denouncing taxation without representation as a 'dangerous and unprecedented innovation' and a threat to colonial liberty, A few days later (October, 1765) a CONGRESS OF DELEGATES ·from nine colonies met in New York and passed a set of resolutions asserting that "no taxes can be constitutionally imposed on them but by their respective legislatures" and that the stamp Act had a "manifest tendency to subvert the rights and liberties of the colonist."

The constitutional issue thus drawn centered on the question of representation, The American colonists opposed the orthodox English principle of "virtual representation". that is representation by classes and interests than by locality, The American leaders argued that no "imperial" Parliament existed and that their only legal relations were with the Crown, This the king was equally a king of England as of Massachusetts but the English Parliament had no right to pass laws for Massachusetts, which can only be done by the Massachusetts Legislative Assembly, Feeling the effects of the ;American boycott, the ROCKINGHAM MINISTRY got the Stamp Act repealed by Parliament in 1766, The Sugar Act was greatly modified.

But it was only a respite, because in 1767 came another series of measures which stirred anew all the elements of discovered. CHARLES TOWNSEND, the British Chancellor of Exchequer, drafted a new fiscal policy. He imposed duties on paper, tea, glass and lead exported from Britain to the colonies. The revenue thus raised was to be spent on the defence of the colonies. The reaction was adverse; riots occurred at many places. British goods were boycotted. In March 1770, the situation became serious when three colonists were killed by British soldiers. Dubbed as BOSTON MASSACRE, the incident demonstrated British ruthlessness, and raised the colonial hostility to a new pitch. Realising the colonial opposition, Parliament beat a strategic retreat by replacing the Townshed duties in 1770. But the duty on tea was retained, because George III insisted that there must always be one tax to keep up the right. Yet things calmed down, and after some time, trade was resumed and prosperity returned to the colonies.

However, a small number of American PATRIOTS and RADICALS kept the struggle alive. They hold that as long as the tea tax remained, the principle of Parliament's right over the colonies remained. Typical of the patriots was their influential leader SAMUEL ADAMS of Massachusetts, who struggled tirelessly for one single end - the independence. He wrote articles, addressed meetings and initiated resolutions in provincial Assembly, which advocated struggle for freedom and democracy. In 1772. Adams induced a Boston town meeting to select a committee to state the rights and grievances of the colonists. The ideas spread fast. Committees were founded in virtually all the colonies and out of them soon grew the base of effective revolutionary organisations.

In 1773. Britain furnished Adams and his supporters with an issue. The powerful East India Company was granted a monopoly on all tea exported to the colonies. This ill-considered step aroused colonial traders and threw them again into alliance with the Patriots. It was not



only the loss of the tea trade but the principle of monopoly that motivated them to action. Moreover, they disliked the imposition of the duty of 3 dollar per pound on the tea thus imported. The Patriots and Sons of Liberty formed a party known as the BOSTON TEA PARTY and on 16 December, 1773, its members threw into the sea 340 chests of tea that had come from India.

This incident greatly agitated the British politicians and parliamentarians. The British government resorted to stern action through a few Parliamentary Acts, which were termed by the colonists as "Coercive and Intolerable Acts." The BOSTON PORT ACT closed the economically vital sea-port of Boston until the tea was paid for; the QUARTERING ACT required the local colonial authorities to find suitable quarters for British soldiers and the QUEBEC ACT granted religious freedom to Catholics in Canada.

"These Acts, instead of subduing Massachusetts, motivated other states to come to her aid. Unity and freedom were their watchwords. A CONTINENTAL CONGRESS, represented by delegates from all the 13 colonies met at PHILADELPHIA on 5th of September, 1774 and resolved against the coercive Acts and instructed each town to form 'ASSOCIATION' for trade boycott with the mother country. The Association would supervise non-importation, non-exportation and non-consumption in all the 13 colonies. Meanwhile, General THOMAS GAGE was entrusted with the responsibility of enforcing the coercive Acts. On 18 April, 1775, the first military clash between the British troops and colonists took place at Lexington, when 8 colonial soldiers died. It was followed by the Second Continental Congress at Philadelphia on 4 July, 1776, which issued the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE drafted by THOMAS JEFFERSON. Now, the war was on.

The role of France was important too in the American war. The French did not forget the humiliation in the Seven Years' War and in India. They still nursed a feeling of revenge against the British and therefore they incited the American colonists to revolt against the mother country. The French also promised help to the Americans.

Even as the Declaration was being debated, the Congress set up a united colonial militia and appointed Colonel GEORGE WASHINGTON as the commander-in-chief of the American forces. He was an outstanding personality. His cool composure in a difficult situation and thorough information about enemy's weak points turned him into a great stalwart of warfare. His sound judgment, military skill and indomitable courage were the



winning traits in the years to come.

The role of pamphleteers and publicities in creating a spirit of independence was remarkable. Even after the Continental Congress, Americans in general could not think of complete separation from the mother-country. The loyalty to the British king was still great. Then came THOMAS PAINE'S fifty-page pamphlet, COMMON SENSE in January, 1776. In vigorous and inspiring manner, it drove home the necessity of independence. Paine even attacked the monarchy. "One honest man was worth more to society than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived," he said. He championed the cause of liberty and prosperity in a self-sufficient independent republic. Within a few weeks, thousands of copies of the pamphlet were sold out, and created opinion in favour of independence.

### Conclusion

The American War of Independence started in 1776 but its background was being prepared since a long past. Composition of the American colonies, lack of transport and communication, system of colonial government and above all, the economic colonialism constitute the fundamental causes for the Revolution. On the other hand, the seven years' war, the series of discriminatory Acts passed by the British Parliament, the incidence of Boston Tea Party and the pamphleteer of America aggravated the differences in attitude between the colonists and the mother-country.

### Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : A Textbook of Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास

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