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**DAILY EDITORIAL  
ANALYSIS**

**TOPIC**

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**WAR AGAINST BRITISH COLONIALISM  
BEGAN LONG BEFORE 1857**

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## WAR AGAINST BRITISH COLONIALISM BEGAN LONG BEFORE 1857

### Context

- May marks the **169th anniversary of the 1857 Revolt** and historical evidence shows that **India's struggle against British colonialism** began much before 1857, especially with **early 19th century revolts in South India**.
- However, historiography has disproportionately emphasized 1857 as the 'First War of Independence' creating an **imbalanced understanding of India's freedom struggle**.

### Resistance to British Rule in India Before 1857

- India witnessed **widespread but fragmented resistance** against British expansion before the Revolt of 1857.
- These uprisings were led by **peasants, tribal groups, zamindars, rulers, and local chieftains** reacting to **economic exploitation, political annexation, and cultural interference**.
- They were localised and laid the **foundation of anti-colonial consciousness**.

### Early Resistance in South India

- **Post Anglo-Mysore Wars (Background):** After the defeat of Tipu Sultan (1799), the **East India Company (EIC) expanded rapidly** in South India.
  - ◆ Governor-General **Richard Wellesley's Subsidiary Alliance system** aimed to control princely states.
  - ◆ It led to **political subordination and economic burdens**, triggering resistance.

### Civil Rebellions (Zamindars & Local Chiefs)

- **Poligar (Palaiyakkarar) Rebellions (1790s–1805) in South India:** Represent **organized military resistance** to British expansion; led by local chieftains (Poligars) in Tamil Nadu.
  - ◆ Leaders: **Kattabomman, Maruthu Pandiyar**
  - ◆ Cause: British revenue demands, loss of autonomy
  - ◆ Nature: Guerrilla warfare
  - ◆ **'Peninsular Confederacy' (1800–1801):** Organized by **Periya Maruthu and Chinna Maruthu**, aimed to **coordinate resistance across South India**.
  - ◆ **Tiruchirappalli Proclamation (1801):** It called for unity among Indians and armed resistance against British rule.
- **Vizianagaram Revolt (1794):** Conflict between local ruler and British over **administrative control**
- **Kittur Revolt (1824):**
  - ◆ Leader: **Rani Chennamma**
  - ◆ Cause: Doctrine-like annexation policies
- **Velu Thampi's Revolt ie Travancore Revolt (1808–1809)**
  - ◆ **Causes: Subsidiary Alliance burden** on Travancore; excessive taxation and British interference; and economic distress due to forced subsidies.
  - ◆ **Leadership: Velu Thampi (Dalawa of Travancore);** Alliance with **Paliath Achan (Cochin);** and attempt to seek French assistance.
  - ◆ **Kundara Proclamation (1809):** Accused British of **treachery and exploitation**; and warned against **cultural destruction and economic monopolies**.

### Other Movements

- **Sanyasi–Fakir Rebellion (1763–1800):** Armed resistance combining **Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs**
  - ◆ **Region:** Bengal
  - ◆ **Leaders:** Majnu Shah, Chirag Ali
  - ◆ **Cause:** British restrictions on **pilgrimage and movement**; and economic distress after **Bengal famine (1770)**
- **Pagal Panthis & Faraizi Movement:** These movements reflect **religio-political resistance against colonial authority**.
  - ◆ **Region:** Bengal
  - ◆ **Cause:** Agrarian oppression, religious-social reform and resistance to zamindars supported by the British.
- **Tribal Revolts:** These were as **defensive reactions to colonial intrusion into traditional systems**.
  - ◆ **Chuar Revolt (1760s–1800s)** in Bengal; **Kol Revolt (1831–32)** in Chotanagpur; **Santhal Rebellion (1855–56)** in Jharkhand region; and **Bhil & Khasi uprisings**
  - ◆ **Causes:** Land alienation, forest restrictions, and exploitative revenue policies.
- **Resistance by Deposed Rulers:** These were **state-level resistances** against British political domination.
  - ◆ **Examples:** Mysore Resistance (Hyder Ali & Tipu Sultan); Maratha Resistance (1775–1818); Awadh & Punjab resistance.

### Factors for Pre-1857 Resistance

- **Localized and Fragmented Nature:** Most uprisings were **regional (Bengal, South India, tribal belts)**.
  - ◆ No **pan-Indian coordination or communication**.
- **Diverse Social Composition:** Participants included Peasants (Sanyasi, Indigo revolts); Tribals (Santhal, Kol); Zamindars & rulers (Poligars, Kittur); and Religious groups (Fakirs, Wahabis).
  - ◆ Broad participation indicates **widespread discontent**, but lack of unity weakened impact.
- **Economic Grievances as Core Cause:** Heavy land revenue demands; destruction of traditional economies; and exploitation by moneylenders and zamindars.
  - ◆ Economic issues were the **primary mobilizing factor**, not nationalism.
- **Political Causes and Loss of Autonomy:** Annexation policies; Subsidiary Alliance system; and interference in local governance.
  - ◆ **Examples:** Poligar resistance, Velu Thampi revolt, and Kittur uprising
  - ◆ Resistance often aimed to **restore old political order**, not create a new nation-state.
- **Traditional and Conservative Outlook:** Movements sought to **protect traditional rights and customs**; and resistance was often against **change imposed by British rule**. Backward-looking orientation limited transformative potential.
- **Use of Armed and Guerrilla Warfare:** Guerrilla tactics (Poligars); and armed peasant uprisings (Santhals, Fakirs).
  - ◆ They lacked **modern organization and strategy** though militarily significant.

- **Absence of Modern Nationalism:** No concept of **Indian nationhood**; and loyalty was to region, tribe, and local ruler.
  - ◆ Pre-1857 revolts lacked **national consciousness**.
- **Lack of Central Leadership and Ideology:** No unified leadership or common program; and no shared political vision.
  - ◆ Movements remained **sporadic and reactive**, not strategic.
- **Inferior Resources vs British Power:** Poor weaponry and lack of training.
  - ◆ British superiority in technology, organization, and intelligence networks.

### Impact & Long-Term Significance

- Most revolts failed (*immediate outcome*), but exposed **exploitative nature of colonial rule**, created **tradition of resistance**, and prepared ground for **1857 and later nationalism**.
  - ◆ Early revolts formed part of a **continuum of resistance leading to 1857**.
- **Reasons for Neglect are scarcity of printed records** (pre-1857 era), dominance of **North Indian historiography**, and greater documentation of 1857 due to **press and colonial records**.

### Conclusion

- Pre-1857 resistance movements were **not failures but precursors**. Their **localized, traditional, and fragmented nature** limited immediate success, but they played a crucial role in **shaping anti-colonial consciousness**.
- The Revolt of 1857 can thus be seen as a **culmination of these earlier resistances**, rather than a sudden beginning.

Source: HT

### Daily Mains Practice Question

- [Q] The Revolt of 1857 was not the beginning but a culmination of earlier resistance to British colonial rule. Examine with reference to pre-1857 uprisings in India.