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The Chapekar Brothers and the Dawn of Revolutionary Nationalism

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WHY IN NEWS

June 22 marks the anniversary of the action of the Chapekar brothers. On June 22, 1897, during the celebrations of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Damodar and Balkrishna Chapekar shot dead W.C. Rand, chairman of the Pune Plague Committee, and Lt. Ayerst, in protest at coercive anti-plague measures. The episode, now 129 years old, is widely regarded as the first act of revolutionary nationalism in modern India after the Revolt of 1857.

THE PLAGUE AND THE PROVOCATION

In 1896-97, an outbreak of bubonic plague swept through the Bombay Presidency, hitting Pune hard. The colonial administration set up a Plague Committee headed by W.C. Rand, a British civil servant, armed with extraordinary powers under the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897.

The measures were ruthless and culturally insensitive. British soldiers carried out forced entry into homes, **segregation** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/segregation/>) of suspected cases, demolition of belongings, and inspections that violated the privacy and dignity of women and the household. These coercive house-searches caused deep resentment across Pune.

THE ASSASSINATION

On the night of June 22, 1897, as Pune lit up for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the Chapekar brothers ambushed Rand and his military escort Lt. Ayerst as they returned from the festivities at Government House. Both officials were shot; they died of their injuries.

Key Personalities

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PERSON	ROLE
Damodar Hari Chapekar	Eldest brother; carried out the shooting; hanged April 18, 1898
Balkrishna Hari Chapekar	Brother; participant; later executed
Vasudev Hari Chapekar	Third brother associated with the wider conspiracy
W.C. Rand	Chairman, Pune Plague Committee; target
Lt. Ayerst	Military escort killed alongside Rand

Damodar Hari Chapekar was arrested, tried and hanged on April 18, 1898. He is remembered as the first Indian revolutionary to be executed by the colonial state. The other brothers and associates were also tried and executed.

IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS

The Chapekar brothers were inspired by the militant nationalism articulated in Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Marathi newspaper Kesari. Tilak's writings on the plague administration and on self-respect created an intellectual climate of resistance. In the aftermath, the colonial government prosecuted Tilak for **sedition** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/sedition/>) in 1897, an early use of Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code against a nationalist leader.

SIGNIFICANCE IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

THEME	SIGNIFICANCE
First revolutionary act	Marks the start of the revolutionary stream after 1857
Cultural assertion	A response to colonial disregard for Indian customs and privacy
Sedition law	Triggered Tilak's 1897 sedition trial under Section 124A
Inspiration	Influenced later revolutionaries in Maharashtra and Bengal

The action distinguished the revolutionary stream of the freedom movement from the constitutional methods of the early Congress moderates. It demonstrated that grievances rooted in colonial high-handedness could erupt into direct action, and it foreshadowed the wider revolutionary upsurge of the early twentieth century.

ANALYSIS

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The Chapekar episode is best understood not as an isolated crime but as a symptom of the collision between colonial state power and Indian society. The plague administration, however well-intentioned in public-health terms, was enforced with a contempt for local sensibilities that converted a health crisis into a political one. The brothers' act, and the sedition trial that followed, hardened the divide between rulers and ruled and seeded the revolutionary tradition that would later produce figures across the country.

UPSC RELEVANCE

- GS1 (Modern Indian History): the freedom struggle, its stages, and the rise of revolutionary nationalism.
- Prelims: the Chapekar brothers, the 1897 plague and Epidemic Diseases Act, Tilak's Kesari and 1897 sedition trial.
- Mains: Trace the origins of revolutionary nationalism in India and assess the role of colonial repression in shaping it.

FACTS CORNER

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On June 22, 1897, during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the Chapekar brothers shot Plague Committee chief W.C. Rand and Lt. Ayerst in Pune.

Damodar Hari Chapekar was hanged on April 18, 1898, the first Indian revolutionary so executed.

The plague administration operated under the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897.

The brothers were inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak's newspaper Kesari.

The episode led to Tilak's 1897 sedition trial under Section 124A of the IPC.

It is regarded as the first act of revolutionary nationalism after the Revolt of 1857.

Sources: *Press Information Bureau* (<https://pib.gov.in>), *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com>), *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com>)

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