



Revisiting the Historiographical Analysis of the 1857 Revolt

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Abstract

The revolt of 1857 remains one of the most contested events in Indian and colonial historiography, inspiring diverse interpretations across centuries. Initially framed by British narratives as the "Sepoy Mutiny," it was depicted as a localized military uprising rather than a national movement. British literature, memoirs, and press accounts emphasized religious panic, military disloyalty, and the preservation of imperial authority, often dismissing nationalist undercurrents. However, nationalist historians, notably V.D. Savarkar, reframed it as India's First War of Independence, highlighting its broader socio-political roots. The uprising's causes were multifaceted, including socio-economic grievances, political annexations under Lord Dalhousie, erosion of traditional structures, and religious fears most infamously the introduction of greased cartridges. From May 1857 in Meerut to Queen Victoria's 1858 proclamation, the revolt drew sepoys and civilians, though its scope and unity remain debated. British strategies, both military and propagandist, sought to undermine nationalist interpretations, portraying India as fragmented. Muslim perspectives, missionary writings, and colonial press coverage reveal how religious sentiment and civilizational discourse shaped opinion in Britain. Modern scholarship situates the revolt within themes of imperialism, cultural conflict, and proto-nationalism. While debates persist on whether it was a spontaneous mutiny or an organized independence struggle, its role as a precursor to India's freedom movement is undeniable.

Keywords: *Revolt of 1857, Sepoy Mutiny, First War of Independence, Colonial Historiography, British Imperialism.*



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1. INTRODUCTION: A CONTESTED HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Divergent opinions have been expressed regarding the nature of historical writing of the

great outbreak of 1857. Volumes have been written on the subject both by the contemporary and later writers and it is almost an impossible task to in detail with different views and

arguments advanced to support them and it is evident from the fact that a lot of work has been done on every aspect of the revolt, and the Britishers who are very sympathetically attached to these and also because the revolt of 1857 was really connected with the expansion future and fortune of the British Empire in India. (Jones Rosie, 2007). The revolt started by the Sepoy was a great shock jolt to the never-ending rule of British Empire. And it was quite obvious for the Britishers to react and put criticism on these events.

2. BRITISH LITERARY DOMINANCE ON THE REVOLT

Among the various literature on the revolt of 1857 much has been written by the Britishers. And it is known in the world that no literature had been written more than the revolt of 1857 which is everywhere denoted by the Britishers as sepoy mutiny. The memories, journals, diaries, private premises, narratives present on the revolt of 1857 shows that or proves that the incident of the revolt left terror and warning on the minds of the Britishers and gave a clear indication that what type of problems Britishers are to face in India in the right of time and this is the reason why in the whole context of Indo-British relation no other subject grows to criticism than the revolt of 1857 or sepoy mutiny. (Thapar, 2014)

3. THE PAST THROUGH THE LENS OF HISTORIANS

Past is always examined and re-examined with the facts that contain the events as, E.H Carr has said that history is a dialogue between past and present but all depends on the way the past in is being deciphered by the various historians with their own ideas, thoughts and interpretation, so in the making of any event in the present the past plays a very important role and it also has a looking beyond and looking into the theme of the past which do really effects the present. Revolt of 1857 is also such an event which is always in a periphery to be examined and re-examined with the various sources which it had provided but one always tries to remember the historical findings of the various historians who had tried to analyse the revolt of 1857 according to the then prevailing socio-

political environment and in which the whole

event took place, which later on did really established a background for India's future, that led to its freedom. When any event is being categorised within the framework of the prevailing socio-political situation every aspect of the changes is counted. (Bayly, 1990)

4. COLONIALISM AND THE RISE OF BRITISH POWER IN INDIA

The situations in England and the concept of colonialism with imperialism had brought England to India first as a trader then as a consolidator and later as the British Raj. The whole narrative of the developments in the face in respect to colonialism had many facets. A number of events in the late 1750s and 1760s more significantly lead to the establishment of the East India Company with a consolidating position in India. To name them the Battle of 1757 led ultimately to the company acquiring the right in Bengal by collecting its land revenue through a combination of good luck and efficient leadership company gain control in the south, when the French held city of Pondicherry which fell in 1761. The Battle of Buxar three years later resulted in the defeat by the company of a coalition of Indian Princess which paved the penetration of the Britishers in India with all its power. The British victories in India were made possible by the Sepoys troops and small miscellaneous companies of European mercenaries. Lord Clive, the commander in chief in the mid-1760s had reorganised the Indian troops into the first regular force led by a few European officers they were now armed and dressed like European soldiers wearing the Red Jackets that gave them the name Lal Paltan or the Red Battalion from here onwards the story of the relation of the Britishers with the Sepoys was laid down. (Malik, 2008)

5. THE SEPOY AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY: A FRAGILE ALLIANCE

The relationship between the sepoy and the East India Company was of mutual benefit as there was no shortage of work for well-trained fighting men in the second half of the 18th century as the Mughal Empire began its slow

disintegration and various new provincial rulers took the power.(Kaye, 1859)

6. DEBATES OVER THE NAME: MUTINY OR FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

The great uprising of 1857 is known by several other names. The Indian mutiny is the most common and is used both in India and Britain to describe the events that took place during those two tumultuous years it is also called great rebellion, The Sepoy Mutiny or the uprising and during the last 50 years or so has become known as the First War of Indian Independence.

Full title of the history by Dr RC Mazumdar first published in the centenary year is the Sepoy mutiny and the revolt of 1857 which acknowledges the importance of the two events and that contributed to the uprisings the military and the civilian evoked the earliest use of the term Indian mutiny appears in the two volumes of Charles Ball published in 1858. The history of the Indian mutiny and its subtitle is significant giving a detailed account of the Sepoy insurrection in India and a concise history of the great military events which attended to consolidate the British Empire in Hindustan about whom little is known other than that the tapped into the British public's immediate demand for reassurance with his sensational illustrations saw the East India companies progress and eventually domination as inevitable.(Malleson , 1858)

7. EARLY WARNINGS AND THE POLITICAL CLIMATE BEFORE THE REVOLT

The term Hindustan which means the place within Hindus and from which the word India is derived referred in the 18th 19th century only to the area of Northern India around the old capital of Delhi so when the question of India's First War of Independence was established by the historical writings of the nationalist historians especially V.D.Sarvarkar. The whole question of India as a nation was on the talk over. By the beginning of 1857 the East India Company on behalf of the British government had alienated a larger section of Indian people their local grievances has risen. Their grievances were taken into consideration by Sir Charles Napier former commander in chief and Sir Henry Lawrence who was to be

killed during the uprising were not taken into account seriously. The Marquis of Dalhousie Governor General between 1848 and 1856 had presided over the annexation of the Punjab, Satara, Jaipur, Sambalpur in 1849. Jhansi and Nagpur in 1853 and Awadh in 1856, he had stayed in India to see this annexation through. After Dalhousie, Lord Charles Canning arrived to take up his post at a London banquet in August 1855 to mark his new appointment as governor general Canning gave what many people later thought was a remarkably prescient speech which bears, to quote He said –“we must not forget that in the sky of India serene as it is a cloud may arise at first no bigger than a man's hand but which growing bigger and bigger may at last threaten to overwhelm us with ruin”.(Mazumdar, 1957)

The Sepoy mutiny of 1857 Burst it out the calm before the storm. The sepoys articulated the different voices of complaint against the East India Company and whole northern India experience the months of May, June and July as the period of Thunder which was definitely a response against the foreign domination.

8. THE SPARK: CARTRIDGES AND RELIGIOUS FEARS

The method of using of the greased cartridges just became the real cause for the mutiny in an Urdu proclamation issued from Cawnpore on 5th June 1857, under the name of Nana Sahab one of the leading figures of the uprising it was stated that the Sahib at Calcutta[the Governor General and council] issued an order to the effect that the main aim behind the distribution of the cartridges was to Christianize the Indian Army [Christian Karna]for once the soldiers convert to Christianity it will not take long to convert the common people and the fact of the pigs and cows was rubbed on the cartridges this became known through one of the Bengalis who was employed in the cartridges making establishment. These issues of greased cartridges were one of the important reasons for the revolt which is being mentioned in almost every historical writing on the revolt of 1857.(Josie, 1957)

9. TIMELINE OF THE REVOLT: MAY 1857 TO NOVEMBER 1858

The mutiny is stated to be historically began on 10th may 1857 in Meerut and to have ended with the proclamation of Queen Victoria on first November 1858 when the formal announcement of the transfer of the East India Company to the British crown was made there were incidents before 10th may including the revolt of MangalPande which are related to the later events of 1857 there are also isolated captures of rivals after November 1858 but the main events occurred within these 18 months. There are many books that serve and give a detailed account on the day-to-day happenings of the revolt and one of the most important books are of P.J.O Taylor's What Really Happened during the mutiny: A Day-by-Day Account of the Major events of 1857 -1859 in India.(Said, 1978)

10. MODERN INTERPRETATIONS AND CIVILIZATIONAL CLASH

There is no time like the present to look back at the past specifically the events of 1857. One of the book written by Samuel Huntington in the year 1996 entitled The Clash of civilisation and the Remaking of World Order gives a totally different views concerning the revolt of 1857 as it was not a clash between a coloniser and a sepoy but between one civilization with another .The interpretations of the uprising have had many aspects from the very outset in order to understand the past but also to suggest its connexions to an implications for our present conditions and concerns. Indian voices on revolt of 1857 were more or less dominated by the overwhelmingly written in English by British men and some women residing in British India or in Britain.(Metcalf, 1964)

11. NATIONALIST HISTORIANS AND THE REFRAMING OF 1857

The whole periphery of the revolt of 1857 was changed when for the first time in 1909, V.D.Sarvakar came with his theory of India's First War of independence being fought in the year 1857 which he disclosed in his book titled The Indian War of Independence. A theory which was totally against the concept of colonialism.SurendranathSens 1857 published in 1957 under the auspicious of the government of India had a different outlook about the revolt,

in the post-independence era when he talks that the uprisings had its origin in Sepoy discontent but it derived its strength from the dissatisfaction among the civilian, many other studies also talk in the same thought which limelight's the civil and popular dynamics of the uprisings often detailing in specific localities and regions. A different viewpoint was presented by historians C.A.Belly who had a critical synthesis on both the old and new arguments about the revolt of 1857 .In his words the Army mutiny against the British in 1857 -59 occurred due to many other political level reasons and not only military combined with a wide range of local tensions arising from the emergence of new style of landlordism and conflicts over forest areas and nomadic land and inequalities in the suffering from the competition of British important manufacturers which played a very important role.(Robert, 1952)

12. RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

The year 1857 was no doubt marked by the influences of the Muslim domination in India or we can say the Muslim rule. Professor Malik addresses the popular revolt of 1857 in the form of popular Islamic discontentment examining it with the British public reaction or public opinion or attitudes that treated the uprising as a Muslim rebellion. While coming to the conclusion of Muslim insurrection or popular Muslim discontentment he went through many of the newspapers published in London and Manchester as well as in Doubling and Edinburgh and through the periodical literature which as he had rightly observed has not been mined in depth his survey of church, missionary and lay periodicals Enables him to uncover a wealth of material in the shape of article, sermon's, diaries journals, editorials, dialogues, poems ,letters .extracts of letters and on the spot reports and to point out the considerable influence that missionaries and while did in shaping the British imagination about 1857. So, a new concept of Mahmoud Rebellion emerged and opinion also was talked about concerning the revolt of 1857 as a' jihad weighed by worldwide Islam against worldwide Christianity and a clash of civilization'.

13. BRITISH POLITICAL AND MEDIA RESPONSE

It was quite evident that the revolt of 1857 which is being denoted as only the military upsurge, was no doubt an incident which really affected the whole British Raj as such the British very brilliantly tried to suppress the very views of it being accepted as a nation, response against the policies of exploitation. The government in Britain decided not to become alarmed and most of the press either followed its skew or adopted a divisive policy of wait and see. The government always used to deny the fact that it was a danger to the British Empire or the outbreak would soon be suppressed by military forces already present in India. V. S. Smith the then board of control president for India speaking in the Commons on 29 June 1857 was of the view that the whole revolt will be quickly suppressed. While disclosing the mail of General George Anson, the commander in chief of India V.A. Smith informed the house, that the insurgent headquarters at Delhi was already ravaged and he felt convinced that the next mail would bring the news of its reduction. If the Scotsman, the Manchester Guardian, the Illustrated London News and others entertained no doubts regarding the prompt and easy suppression of the mutiny, The Times took it still more likely expressing the delights that the mutiny was confined to only a few regiments at Meerut and Delhi and it was not a national upsurge and that all other stations were reported to be quiet. The paper resolutely put cheerily advocated as a safeguard for the future and it stated that the revolt was none other than discontentment of the few, the paper observed:

Now that we have conquered India from the Indus to the frontiers of Siam it is our own interest to establish in it a homogeneity which it has never before possessedWhy, for instance should there be a Mogul at Delhi whose very existence as we see in the present case preserves the memory of what we should endeavour to obliterate? We would even hope that the death of the Nizam may be the occasion of the Deccan in being brought more completely under British sovereignty. We cannot now refuse our past or change our destiny. To retain power in India, we must sweep away every political establishment

and every social usage which may prevent our influence from being universal and complete.¹³ The Times 29th June 1857 cf George D Beer's British attitude towards India 1780-1858 OUP Press London 1961 page 230-5 in the book 1857 War of Independence or clash of civilization British public reactions salahuddin Malik

14. MANIPULATING PUBLIC OPINION THROUGH THE PRESS

But the next various mails which came to India stated a very different kind of story that the revolt was not a simple uprising but it spread it through many parts of India and took a very strong feeling of a national upsurge. The writings of the revolt of 1857 specially when concerned with the British outlook presents a fact that the uprising was not of such a vast and it was quickly and soon suppressed by the army of the British India. The public was soon deluded with pamphlets and articles, statements and letters, speeches and sermons, works of poetry and fiction and cracks, military, religious and political, largely written anonymously by officers and officers, why civilians and machineries, enthusiasts in theology and aspirants in politics. Public meetings began to be held on an unprecedented scale. Lectures were delivered, speeches made in an attempt to bring public opinion in tune with the interest of the. But later on when these things were being deciphered the scenario was quite different which talked about other various facets of the revolt of 1857 which has to be noted down in the contemporary historical writings which appears as if everybody tried to say something irrespective of his knowledge of India and all seemed to be nervous about the outbreak of 1857. Wednesday 7th October 1857 was denoted as the day of national humiliation, fasting and prayers. The special services often three in the day were held in the churches all over Britain and attracted large numbers (G.O, 1959).

15. CRITICISM OF BRITISH SOURCE AUTHENTICITY

When the histories of revolt of 1857 is being written then it is evident that a few words on the sources of British information on India have to be looked back. Written inquiries to some of those newspapers in which state

amount the events of revolt of 1857 when looked into says a different story because none of the professional reporters stated in India at the time of the outbreak (Stokes, 1959). Several of the reporters who were making the news as originating from their own correspondent reveals that these correspondents actually belong to one of the interest classes of Britain so their reports were being coloured by their own interests and opinion.

16. THE MYTH OF INDIAN NATIONHOOD IN BRITISH DISCOURSE

The times, The Manchester, Guardian and others newspapers in the past had supported a forward policy in India specially in regard to political and social and admitted that the mutiny was also a reaction against the anglicized and modernised conception towards Indian Mutiny. They propagated the socio-political concept towards the rebellion and emphasised the grievances of the Sepoys in regard to social, religious, military, political and financial causes. Also they explain the outbreak as a purely military uprising which it was argued selfish interested parties took advantage of it. The British views never accepted the nation theory in regard to the revolt of 1857 rather it stressed upon the nationalities of India regarding India as a merely geographical expression. The Saturday review called the Indian subcontinent an 'untampered assemblance of tribes, races, classes and sets bound into a hole by the solitary tie of obedience to some strong master. India was never presented by the British as a nation and always defined not in the sense as claimed, England was to Englishman or even Italy to Italian, they were of the view that from the Himalayas to Cameron as one of the writers in Blackwood's Edinburgh magazine says, 'the use of the term national is in India a mockery a delusion and a snare.' (Spear, 1961)

17. BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERIORITY

Again when we look into the evidences of the time the Manchester, Guardian commenting on the relation between the Europeans and the Indians especially when they landed into Bengal presidency the European superiority which are natural activity of disposition and strength of body and mind can be clearly seemed as their

exercise, the result was reasoned the paper said that they became an imposter trading upon a capital that he has lost now that the English were no better than the Indians themselves they could no longer command the usual respect from them and one of the officers Jacob strongly advised his compatriot officers as to quote him:

'All our power in India rest on this. We may lay down as an absolute certainty that the millions of natives which are handful of English men govern in this vast continent will not consent to be governed by a handful of their equals. Our power consists in our being essentially different and their belief in our moral superiority only. The only thing which can endanger the existence of this power is the destruction or weakening of that belief.' (Mohan, 1999)

18. KEY HISTORIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONS AND DEBATES

The historiographical aspects on the revolt, of 1857 basis on various facets among which are certain questions which has always been asked what were the real causes of the outbreak on 10th may 1857? what was the cartridges incident? or it was a religious discontentment what was its nature? was it an army revolt first and later it was denoted as a mutiny ?which developed into a national struggle in a limited or general sense, what's the revolt instigated from outside ? or was it a Muslim revolt only these are some of the questions while reading and writing about the revolt is being taken into consideration. (Taylor, 1997)

19. RELIGIOUS FEARS AS A ROOT CAUSE

There are many variations of the mutiny theme which has to be examine and re-examine the unanimous agreement among all British public regarding the revolt of 1857 was based on religious panic as the major causeway of the outbreak the Manchester Guardian called them men of limited experience and narrow views people with an infantile imagination incapable of appreciating a national character different from their own it branded them as a people deficient in philosophic care and accuracy not observing how in all human affairs the greatest even

sometimes appear too hinge upon the most inadequate causes.

A writer in the machinery herald wrote about the revolt of 1857 as a religious fear which was generated by so many factors put together not only cartridges which is being evident in this article which says

‘ During the extraordinary troubles from which we are now emerging nothing has so cheered our minds as the fact ,which appears to be now well established, that the disaffection of the native troops has originated in their dread of the growing power of Christianity .Most strangely have they erred in believing that the government was endeavouring to interrupt them into the sacrifice of their caste yet we believe they are right in apprehending that their idols and superstitions are decaying and will be speedily overthrown not by might nor by power’.([IBID](#))

20. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES: PRELUDE TO INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

At the end this whole issue of revolt of 1857 can best be estimated and understood by one of the strong opinions and full from Lord Shaftesbury who confidently declared, to quote him:

‘And who were they that perpetrated these atrocities was this a nation rising in a sense of its wrong writhing under torture, plunder, oppression and cruelty writhing under the violation of every sacred and social right-rising to recover their lost liberties rising as one man to assert their independence and the integrity of their religion? No such thing. Has any proclamation been put out by the rebels that they have a single wrong to complain of? Have you found in any one instance a national or even the symptom of a national rising? Has not the whole country with a very few exceptions being perfectly tranquil and quiescent? Have not the greater part of the villagers assisted the royal troops and attempted to discomfort the mutineers? wherever an exception occurred it may be traced to brigands and those wild lawless hordes that always will be found on the continent of India, wandering from one village to another. The villagers themselves in no instance have a rise in against a British power; on the contrary they have known that their security

consisted in the vigour, and permanence of her majesty’s dominion who then were the mutineers and from whom arose the frightful rebellion?([Sen, Surendranath](#))

He asserted that from monster of British creation, the army aroused the revolt of 1857 three days later the Manchester Guardian wholeheartedly accepted the views of Lord Shaftesbury and it is definitely held that it was a start against questioning the foreignness attitude of the Britishers towards India and there is a need to question whether it be in a fragmented way or in a whole heartedly way it is evident through various sources that revolt of 1857 was definitely a prelude to India’s struggle for independence with which it did really achieved in 1947 and after more than 200 of its appearance the whole question of revolt of 1857 as the starting point for India’s liberation against the foreign rule has to be established and remembered as India’s First War of Independence.

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