

An Assessment of Uprising against the Indian Revolt of 1857: British Historiography

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Abstract – The Uprising of 1857 was in many ways a representation of such feelings among the people. The Uprising shook the foundation of British rule but was suppressed with great power and ruthlessness. The Uprising of 1857 is a great landmark in the history of India. The year 1857 symbolizes a turning point in the history of modern India because in that eventful year an upsurge, invariably referred to as the 'Mutiny' in most contemporary accounts, took on the dimensions of a rebellion as the princes and people of India, following the lead given by the sepoys, challenged a well-established administrative set up. Over the years, the nature and scope of this great struggle has been the subject of controversy with historians in India and overseas. During the last one and half century a massive literature have been produced by the historians and scholars on this event. However, it goes without saying that this Uprising occupies a unique place in the annals of Indian freedom struggle.

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INTRODUCTION

The Uprising of 1857 had both material and emotional causes. It began as a mutiny within the ranks of the native *sipahi* or 'sepoy' army of the Bengal Presidency in North India. The immediate provocation for this mutiny lay in rumours that claimed, amongst other things, that the armies were to be issued with a new rifle, the Enfield, the cartridges for which were greased with the fat of pigs and cows. This was supposed to be a deliberate attempt to undermine the religions of both Hindu and Muslim soldiers in the army. This explanation was favoured by British historians of the time, but behind these rumours lay more general anxieties, concerning the Christian missionary activities encouraged by the East India Company and the perceived and real injustices perpetuated under Company rule. Hindus and Muslims thus rose simultaneously some historians claim to protect their *dharma* (religious ethic) and *din* (faith) and to 'save the country'. However, a more immediate cause of discontent amongst the sepoys was the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856, which threatened to remove the substantial special payments made to troops serving beyond the boundaries of the Presidency and which proposed to diversify recruitment, thereby removing the priority accorded to sons of sepoys. This attack on the livelihoods of sepoy families was considered an act of betrayal.

The 19th Native Infantry, stationed at Barrackpore just west of Calcutta, was the first regiment to take up arms against its officers. Those involved in this mutiny were

arrested and the regiment disbanded. On the day following the initial outbreak – 29 March 1857 – Mangal Pande of the 34th Regiment, which had been barracked alongside the 19th, fired at his commanding officer but was overpowered. He and another sepoy were tried and executed. After the 34th was also disbanded, rumours about the greased cartridges and the summary disbanding of regiments spread rapidly. Six weeks later, a thousand miles away, a native regiment at Meerut was publicly humiliated for refusing even to train in the use of the (yet to be issued) cartridges, being marched in shackles to jail. The next evening (10 May), the remaining sepoys rallied around the guns of their regiments, forced open the armoury, released their colleagues from jail, and attacked and killed their British officers along with a number of civilians. The following day they marched to Delhi. By demanding that the aged Mughal emperor in Delhi, Bahadur Shah II, should support their revolt, and by calling for the expulsion of the British *feringhi* from India, the Meerut regiments indicated their desire for a restoration of past authority.

Simultaneously, although they had no desire for a revival of Mughal rule, many north Indian elites rose to arms to defend their respective territories following the collapse of British power. Other regiments joined the Mutiny, eventually totalling more than 100,000 soldiers. But in the absence of effective leadership, the uprising degenerated into uncoordinated sieges of the surviving British garrisons in north India, made famous by the prolonged struggle to rescue besieged

British families from the British Residency in Lucknow (finally achieved in November 1857) and infamous by the massacre in June and July 1857 of British soldiers and their families at Kanpur

The military mutiny was accompanied by a widespread civil insurrection which affected most of the Indo-Gangetic plain. The fiercest fighting was in the territory of the former princely state of Awadh in eastern Uttar Pradesh, from which many sepoys had been recruited. The British seizure of this once loyal kingdom, the deposition of the Nawab (formally regent of the Mughal empire), the raising of land taxes, and the displacement of aristocratic landlords (*talukdars*) were all important factors furthering the revolt. British reprisals were ruthless and re-captured towns and cities were laid waste as well as villages which had supported the mutineers.

The British faced continual uprisings in India but that of 1857-59 was by far the largest and most bloody. The 1857 uprising was also the most politically significant. Since British families were caught up in the fighting there was widespread public support for the sending of Government troops to India to put down the rebellion. The capture, deposition and exile of the last Timurid Emperor in September 1857 marked the end of Mughal rule and vast new territories came under the direct control of the British, including the former Mughal imperial capital of Delhi. However, the campaign bankrupted the East India Company and from 1858 onwards the EIC's Indian territories were brought under the rule of the British crown. The uprising was thus of global significance, since after this date the activities of British trading corporations across the globe were replaced by the establishment of formal imperial control. 1857 thus marks (following the loss of the American colonies in 1769) the beginning of what has been termed 'the second British empire'. At the second time it provided an important inspiration to later Indian nationalists.

The Uprising of 1857 was one of the largest and strongest anti colonial movement in the East of Suez faced by British Imperialism in the 19th century. The Uprising of 1857 forms one of the most important studies 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 Indian and at some points it seemed at that time that the British rule would end for all time to come. The Uprising started merely as a sepoy mutiny soon engulfed the peasantry and other civilian population across the wide areas of India.

The British rule which was formally established after the battle of Plassey in 1757 in Bengal, aimed to fill the coffers of the East India Company at the expenses of the Indians. East India Trading Company established in 1600 by a group of merchants as 'The Company of Merchants of London' trading in to the East Indies, and later come to be known as the Honourable East India Company (HEIC). After obtaining trading rights by the

Mughal Emperor Jahangir, the Company set up its first trading post in Surat in the early years of the 17th century. A second factory and Fort St. George was opened in Madras in 1640 with the consent of the Vijayanagar ruler.

The tribal movement from the late 18th century to the first half of the 19th century culminated in the form of the Uprising of 1857. No other event in the history of India has attract so much attention as the Uprising of 1857. The uprising involved millions upon millions of people scattered over a wide region. Though it originated with sepoys but very soon it turned into the uprising of people. The rebels fought bravely and posed a serious challenge to the British government.

The revolts of 1857 originated with the mutiny of the sepoys. These sepoys were drawn mainly from the peasant population of North and West India. Essentially the oppressive policies followed by the East India Company were impoverishing and ruining the peasantry. This must have affected the sepoys also. Infect most of them had joined the military service in order to supplement their fast declining agricultural income. The Armies of Hindoostan have fought faithfully on behalf of the king of London and the Hon'ble Company and conquered for them the countries extending from Calcutta to Peshawar.

At the beginning of 1857, the East India Company had a composite force of European and Indian troops to guard its interests in India. By a coincidence the European troops were abnormally below establishment, and amounted to some 4 regiments of cavalry, 31 regiments of Infantry and 64 batteries or companies of Artillery. There were 6,170 officers and 39,352 men in these units. They were armed with the Enfield rifle, and the artillery had 6pdr and 9pdr field guns, and 24 pdr siege guns with 8 inch howitzers and mortars. The Indian troops, who were armed with the old „Brown Bess“ musket, were divided into three armies based in Madras, Bombay and Bengal. The Bengal Army alone consisted of some 34 regiments of cavalry (regular and irregular), 119 regiments of Infantry, 32 companies of Artillery and 6 companies of Engineers, with a total strength of some 135,767 troops of all ranks. It is difficult to compute, with any accuracy, the exact number of those troops that actually mutinied, but the figure probably approaches 100,000 trained soldiers. The preponderance of Brahmins in the Bengal Army was very great and a high proportion of these had been recruited from Oudh, Chiefly the Byswara and Bonoda Divisions of that Province.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE POPULAR UPRISINGS

Political-religious Movements - These movements erupted in the early phase of colonial expansion. In this phase religion provided the framework to locate and understand the colonial rule and articulate resistance. The main politico-religious movements

were the Fakir Uprising, Sanyasi Rebellion, Pagal Panthis, Wahabi Movement, Faraizi Movement and Kuka Movement and Moplah rebellion.

Movement by deposed rulers and Zamindars – This category of the rebellions was affected by the aggressive policy of annexation by the British and the subsequent disturbances in the economy of the regions. The problems were accentuated by the exacting land revenues. These uprisings are mainly known either by the name of the leader or the region where they occurred. VeluThampi and Polygar Rebellions are two main Uprisings in this category.

Movements by the dependents of the deposed ruler- These rebellions were caused by the aggressive policy of annexation by the British and the subsequent disturbances in the economy of the regions.

Three main revolts can be clubbed under this category were Ramosi Uprising, Gadkari Uprising and Sawantwadi Revolt. It is interesting to note that these three revolts occurred in the Maratha Region.

Tribal Movements-

- a) Non-Frontier Tribal movements-These are divided in three phases
 - i. First Phase-1795-1860: Santhal Rebellion and Khond uprising
 - ii. Second Phase-1860-1920: Munda uprising and Koya Rebellion
 - iii. Third Phase-1920-1947: Rampa Rebellion and Chenchu tribal Movements
- b) Frontier Tribal Movements: Khasi Uprising, Singphos Rebellion and Rani Gaidiniliu's Naga Movement

REVOLT OF 1857

The Revolt of 1857 has been hailed as the watershed in the colonial history of British India. Battle of Plassey in 1757 marked the beginning of the political influence of the England East India Company, an influence which ended in 1858 when the Crown rule was established in British India. A decade short of a century later in 1947, India gained independence. It is also regarded as an historic landmark for its suppression was followed by some fundamental changes in the administration of India.

The Revolt of 1857 was fundamentally different from earlier rebellions by the soldiers, peasants and tribal's of the nineteenth century. Prior to this, the mutinies and rebellions had remained sporadic or local affairs. However, unlike these, the scale and spread of the

Revolt of 1857 was larger; sepoys at many centre mutinied and this was accompanied by civil disturbances. Unexpected as it was, it managed to shake the British. Though by the end of 1857 itself the British had started to regain control, the Revolt of 1857 remains a significant event.

What differentiated the Revolt of 1857 from the earlier uprisings was that unlike the preceding mutinies and revolts, which were limited to a relatively smaller area, within a town or at the most a few districts, the 1857 Revolt escalated to an unprecedented degree and the participation was wider

Areas affected by the Revolt of 1857 – In Bengal, it was primarily the Bengal army which was recruited from North Western Provinces and especially Awadh, that rose up in mutiny. The sepoys were joined by the civilians from the North, Central and Western India.

Areas that did not participate in the Revolt – The Punjab, Bengal, most of Central Provinces, The coast and the south remained largely unaffected by it. While the Bombay and the Madras regiments did not participate in the revolt, the Gurkha and the Punjabi Soldier fought on behalf of the English to put down the rebels.

ASSESSMENTS OF THE BRITISH GENERALS

Sepoy Rebellion (1857-59), popularly known as the Indian war of Independence or Uprising against British rule in India begun by Indian troops (Sipahi or sepoys) who were in the employ of the English East India Company. The Rebellion was the first concerted attempt by the people of South Asia to overthrow the British Indian Empire. There is a large body of documents from the time; writings of the Military officials like – Otto Trevelyan, F.S. Roberts, James Hope Grant, H. L. Nevill, R.P. Anderson and other military historians on the events of the Uprising of 1857.

Famous Major military historian, Lt. General James McLeod

Innes was an engineer officer present during the operation in Oudh. His most useful contribution to our knowledge of the Lucknow Residency siege is the series of sketches he made of the Residency buildings and the defensive position taken up by the British, from various angles.

Lieutenant-General McLeod Innes, who took part in the defense of the Residency and was a part of the garrison all through in the siege of Lucknow, wrote a number of books on the Mutiny. In 1857 he published a 'Rough Narrative of the siege of Lucknow' which was supplemented in 1858 by the 'Diary of the Staff Officer'. His second book 'Lucknow and Oudh in the

mutiny' came out in 1896 and was well received as a valuable work on the Indian Mutiny. Next year in 1897 Innes published his third book 'The Sepoy Revolt' with the object to give a detailed account primarily of the siege of Lucknow and the operations connected therewith.

The historians, according to MacMunn, have narrated the siege of Delhi in detail, but he considered that the failure of the plans for the assault of Delhi on 13 June was singularly fortunate. He wonders that no master mind as Military leader was thrown up by the Sepoy army but it was not surprising that the effect seniority system of Bengal army should throw upon leader. Yet there should have been some soldier of commanding character in the irregular cavalry.

Lt. Colonel George Gimlete was an army officer with a scholarly interest in the events of the rebellion of 1857 in India. He produced on invaluable commentary on much that had previously been taken for granted. In his work „A Postscript to the Records of the Indian Mutiny“ he argues that no military revolt in the world's history has had so many chronicles as the Indian Mutiny. He made an attempt to trace the career of the sepoy regiments after they had mutinied through the whole course of the rebellion.

Sir George Campbell, I.C.S. was the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal (1871-74). Sir Campbell wrote the accounts of the Uprising of 1857 entitled as, 'Memories of My Indian Career'. He served in various capacities as a private secretary to Lord Dufferin in the Punjab after its annexation. In the early part of 1857 he was secretary to the Government of North-West Provinces under J.R. Colvin and then became Commissioner of Cis-Sutlej States subordinate to the Chief Commissioner of Punjab, Sir John Lawrence.

He was also engaged in some operation of the Mutiny and after the capture of Lucknow he was appointed by Lord Canning as judicial and finance commissioner under Outram. Though his functions were civil while Outram managed the political and military affairs, he had opportunities of seeing and hearing a great deal of the events of 1858. Formerly in Cis Sutlej States he had great opportunities for watching the events of the Punjab and Delhi.

CONCLUSION

The Uprising of 1857 was an epoch making event in the annals of the history of the nineteenth century as it harnessed the people's urge for freedom through a powerful movement which encapsulated diverse approaches and ideologies for the attainment of an immense vision – freedom of the country from the British Colonial rule and establishment of an independent India of the Indians.

The Uprising of 1857 is a most momentous, if tragic, event in the history of Modern India. Historians have held divergent views about Outbreak of 1857. Firstly, it

has been argued that it was a mutiny of a Company's sepoys, pure and simple. The sepoys were discontented on account of various reasons among which the alleged supply of greased cartridges was the principal one. Secondly, it has been said that the Uprising marked a struggle between the civilization of the West and that of India. It has been suggested that the fast approaching tide of the western civilization caused a great alarm in the minds of the conservative sections, and made them combat against the British rule. Thirdly, some scholars are of the view that the Uprising reflected the discontent of the expropriated feudal classes whose powers and privileges had been lately assailed by the British. Fourthly, the Great Uprising was viewed as a secret Muslim conspiracy to oust the British from India and restore the old Muslim sway.

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