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Revisiting the Nature of the Great Uprising of 1857



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Abstract

The paper would try to explore the theoretical underpinnings and interpretive reconstruction of and the ensuing debates by the historians about what conspired the uprising of 1857. By extensively presenting the wider narratives of rebellion, its social, economic and political factors at work, broaden our understanding of the discontent in the indigenous society; delivering few insights to expose the myth behind the conventional account of the 1857. Notwithstanding the fundamentally military origin of the rebellion, various competing narratives of religion, class, communities and locality are also taken in to consideration. This paper would address and also explore the motivations, understanding of the concerns of those who participated in the uprising. It would also attempt to examine the debate over the nomenclature of 1857 as mutiny, rebellion and war of independence by indicating at the wider issues at stake which reminds of the complex and diverse motivation, objectives and understanding of those who participated in the uprising.

Keywords: Mutiny, Rebellion, Popular Mentality, Military Arrangements, Combatants, Proclamations, Agrarian relation, Subaltern, Tribal participation, Racial antagonism, War of Independence.

Introduction

The British, for its own political and economic ends, mastered the game of regime change, of installing puppet regimes by the late 18th century. They first started targeting hostile Muslim regime that presumed to resist the West. Richard Wellesley was sent to India in 1798 with the instructions to replace *Tipu* with the western backed puppet. By 1850, the British had progressed from aggressively removing independent minded Muslim rulers, such as *Tipu sultan* who refused to bow before the mighty power, to destabilize, and then annex even the most pliant Muslim states. In 1856, the British unilaterally annexed *Awadh* on the excuse of misgovernance.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the nature of the revolt of 1857
2. To analyze the various perspectives on the uprising of 1857
3. To study the military aspects of the revolt
4. To evaluate and understand the motivation, aspirations of those who participated in the revolt.

Review of Literature

To substantiate the arguments in the paper, a brief survey of literature by historians is presented which would give understanding of the nuances and complexities of the subject.

Irfan Habib article *Remembering 1857* in journal *people's Democracy*, vol xxx1, no4, 2007 gives understanding about the causes and nature of the uprising, based on rebels proclamation, newspaper accounts and other documents.

Erik Stoke's *Peasant Armed: The Indian Rebellion of 1857*, edited by C.A Bayly, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986 has highlighted the complexity of the agrarian tenure by probing the traditional agrarian order and explored the extent to which rural society underwent fundamental alteration under the Colonial rule. His meticulous study gives insight in understanding how the land revenue system, ecology and relative deprivation became the causes of the rebellion. The work has also dealt on the military dimension and how the Indian resources and forces were utilized by the British for their own benefit.

Rajat Ray's *Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality Before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, oxford university press, 2003, has argued that the sense of Indian patriotism also existed in the past and how

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during the rebellion of 1857 both Hindus and Muslims fought together against the British.

Tapti Roy's work on *The politics of a popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*, oxford university press, 1994 is a exclusive study on the revolt of 1857 in Bundelkhand, a division of north western province. The work gives fresh appraisals on the subject.

Rudranshu Mukherjee's work *on Awadh in Revolt, 1857-88*, oxford university Press, 1984, reprint in 2002, Presents how the complacent supremacy of the British rule was challenged by the people of *Awadh*. He has examined exclusively the area of Oudh which was the focal point of the rebellion, a scene of most tenacious fighting. The account of the agrarian background, interdependence of landlords and peasants and their joint action against the British has been explored. How the annexation destroyed the traditional order of things and laid the foundation of the uprising has also been examined.

Gavin Rand and Crispin Bates (ed.), *Mutiny at the Margins vol-4, sage, 2013*, has explored previously neglected margins in the history of this event. The work has challenged the conventional understanding of the uprising. This volume gives insight about the military aspects of the uprising.

Another volume by Crispin Bates on *Mutiny on at the Margins, Muslim Dalit And Subaltern Narratives*, volume 5, Sage, 2014, has developed a fresh look, focusing in particular on traditionally neglected socially marginal groups and geographic areas that have earlier tended to be unrepresented in studies of 1857 in Colonial and Indian historiography .

Shrin Moosvi, (ed.), *Facets of the Great Revolt 1857*, Tulika Books, 2019 is another important edited work in which the articles provided fresh insights into the rebels cause, their motivation, aspirations in the great uprising. These articles also give glimpse into the minds of rebels who belonged to different areas and classes as well as their organizational capabilities, and problems they confronted during the revolt.

Main Body of the Paper

By this time, British authorities believed in the forward policy of preemptive action by nursing plans to abolish *Bahadur Shah Jaffer's* Mughal court in Delhi and impose not just British laws and technology in India but also British values in the form of Christianity. Missionaries Christians schools, Christians ideas, started making inroads in India and reinforced Muslim fears which increased opposition for the British rule and created a constituency for rapidly multiplying *jehadis*. Muslim religion fighters poured into Delhi from all parts of north and central India, spreading their message in villages along the way.¹

One of the elements of Colonial accounts was the role played by religion in provoking the rebellion and in sustaining their will to fight was frequently invoked as an explanation, justification in these accounts . However, it failed to capture the complexity of the nuances of 1857. Many others interpreted the uprising in alternate ways, contesting the assertion that the course of the events was determined largely by religion and challenging the

Jihadist narratives by expressing wider material and secular issues. Though religion played role in motivating the rebels, but economic, social and political imperatives were also important.²

Indian religion was an important domain of seditious communication. The *dharma sabha* of Calcutta became the great organ of *Brahmanical* reaction against foreigners interfering in the social and religious field to which they were entirely alien. *Maulvis* and servants of declining Muslim courts of upper India, passed anti-British ideas among the population of the presidencies.³

British shared the view that the leaders of the rebellion aimed to restore Muslim power. It was also reflected in the proclamation of early August 1857. The outbreak in Lucknow and Awadh was signaled by the appearance of Persian placards and Hindi and Urdu proclamations urging the citizens to murder Europeans. Alongside anti- British newspapers, indigenous written communication *Akhbarats*, *charitas*, *parwanas*, *Roznamachas* and the like were employed to spread the message of revolt and the restoration of authority of the Muslim power. Moreover, in the British eyes, a most dangerous network of sedition was maintained by Muslims of purist *Tahrik-i-muhamadiya* (wahabi tendency).⁴

Herbert Edward, the evangelical Christian officer serving in western Punjab, denounced the seditious letters sent by the *muhammdan* bigots in Patna and *Thaneshwar* near *Deoband* to soldiers and civilians serving on the north west frontier. The evidence suggests that some connections within the *wahabi* movement along with some *older sufi* networks were used by rebels to coordinate different sectors of the resistance. It was widely held beliefs among British officials and civilians that it was *Muslim* conspiracy against the British rule that led to 1857 revolt. *Wahabis* were active in the north western frontier province, directly confronting British, and regularly getting supply of men and material and had network in Bengal and Bihar.⁵

However, the role of religious network was exaggerated because, after the rebellion, powerful British voices had an interest in making out that the rebellion had been a caste revolt or *muhammdan* conspiracy. Not everyone agreed to it.

P.C.Joshi (ed.), 1857 Revolt – A Symposium, linked 1857 with *Wahabis* who wanted to overthrow the British government by spread of anti – British ideas. They even tried to temper with the loyalty of the army at North Western Frontier Province. C.A.Balay, in '*Information and Empire*' also endorsed the similar narratives of how *Wahabis* of Patna spread sedition through their network in different areas of Bihar, Bengal. After the revolt series of trial against *Wahabis* (1863-72) were started by the British.⁶

Further, W.W hunter wrote '*Indin Musalmans*' in 1870s, where he had noted that the notion of *jihad* had historical continuity from the time of *Shah Walli Wullah* and his son *Abdul Aziz* of Arabia and *Syed Ahmed Beralvi* of Balakot. This notion of *jihad* received support from *Maulana Gulam Rasul Mehr* in his '*1857 Ke Mujahid*'. However, *Maulvi*

Ahmedullah Shah reacted against the element of *jihād* in 1857 revolt which was considered as the dominant trend in the Urdu historiography. He argued that choosing *Bijis Kadir* as leader of the resistance - *jihād* and its important ingredients were missing. Hence in such a situation, fight against the British would not be war of religion but simply fight in self defense.⁷

Syed Ahmed Khan in his discourse '*Asbab-i Bagavati Hind*' - the cause of 1857 rebellion, while talking about fight in self defense, stated how missionaries religious discussion and open debates, the preaching of the missionaries, printing of tracts and its circulations, using unmeasured language, attacking on Hindu- Muslim religious beliefs and values, made everyone anxious to defend their religion. Further, he concluded that Muslims never dared to carry a religious war against the Christians.⁸

Further, studies by large number of historians like *Irfan Habib*, *Rajat Ray*, *William Dalrymple* have reiterated the notion of unity between the two community against the Colonial Government. In '*Felt Community*', *Rajat Ray* had studied the general mentality of rebels and highlighted the popular mentality of rebellion. He has stated that there was no Hindu – Muslim antagonism and both referred each other as soldiers of *Hindustan* fighting against the British rule. His study of some rare Bengali source in which mass rebel ceremony was held at *Bereli* where *Bakht Khan* proceeded with two flags – one green, represented Muslim, and one *kesaria* – Hindu holy *dhwaj*. *Perseval Spear's* book *Twilight of Mughal*, presented elaborately as how in Delhi, population maintained Hindu- Muslim unity. Orders were issued from the mutiny papers by *Bahadur Saha Jaffer* and from *Bakht Khan* to desist from cow slaughter.⁹

The proclamations of the rebels compiled and edited by Professor *Iqbal Hussain* shows that leaders like *Nana Sahib* and others demonstrated complete Hindu- Muslim unity and proclamation of *Nana Sahib* was in Urdu and his vision was not clouded by religion. Proclamation from *jama masjid* appealed against cow slaughter during *baker-id festival* to maintain unity. Muslim *sepoys* fought under Hindu commander and Hindus fought under *Bakht Khan* so there was no question of *jihād* to be linked with the 1857.¹⁰

British power in India rested almost largely on the military labor provided by the *sepoys*. Understanding the complexity of imperial military arrangements is vital for understanding the nature of the Colonial State. Rich collections about *sepoys* reveal their attitudes and motivations which played important part in the extension and defense of colonial power in south Asia during the nineteenth century. While the grievances of the *sepoys* reflected the problems of early Colonial military system which led to its collapse in 1857 and hastened the end of company *raj* and beginning of the formal British imperialism in south Asia. But to call it a mere mutiny is to delegitimize political significance of the uprising. Nationalist historiography objected to label the events of 1857 as *Mutiny*.¹¹

Irfan Habib in his article '*Remembering 1857*', highlighted the contributions of Bengal army. The huge majority of the combatants were upper caste Hindus who had been recruited by the British in the Bengal army. They were sufficiently distrustful of the company's new evangelical Christian agenda and fought for their faith and *din*.

The uprising was triggered by the offence caused by animal fat in the composition of the grease of the Enfield rifle. This line of interpretation argues that the uprising was inspired by religious sentiments of the *sepoys*. Whole of Bengal army revolted step by step throughout the course of the revolt. They were the backbone of the revolt. *Vincent Smith* in '*Oxford History of India*' narrated the role of *sepoys* in the revolt. *J. W. Keye*, British military historian in his '*Sepoys War*' honestly admitted the discontent among the army due to British policy of Colonial expansion. They used Bengal army constantly to fight wars from China to Crimean war against Russia. From 1839-57 they were constantly fighting. They were sent only to die. It was not that they were religious but they were human. British soldiers were not sent on the fronts.

Further, some 3/4th of Bengal army came from *Oudh* and were *Brahmins*, *Muslims* and *sheikhs*. There was no division on castes and religious line at that time. Both fought and shed blood together and developed sense of brotherhood. They were not communal but caste sensitive. They objected introduction of Enfield rifle with pig and beef fat which endangered both Hindu and Muslim religion and destroyed their *dharma*. Caste was pride for them. Moreover, they faced racial antagonism and frequently humiliated at the hands of European officers.¹²

But more than this the fundamental cause of their discontent lied in the area from which they were recruited- *Awadh* which was burdened by heightened revenue. They were peasants in uniform. There are few to record the attitudes and opinions of the soldiers and peasants whose actions were central to insurgency. However, even through partial and fragmentary accounts as their motivations and experiences are not well recorded and difficult to gauge accurately, these can be productively reconstructed.¹³ Secular interpretation of the rebellion of 1857 got prominence with the exploration of economic basis of the rebellion.

Focus is now being shifted away from exclusive emphasis on political elite towards the lesser folk. Men who had risen against the British belonged to different groups and cross- section of society. These were not only *Talukdars* *Zamindars*, *Rajas* *Nawabs* whose participation was conspicuous but also peasants, weavers, *sepoys* and *Tribals*.²²

Certainly in an open rebellion against the state, the largest group in opposition was of big landlords – who had the most to lose under the British rule. Moreover, *D.D. Koshambi* had also held the view in 1954 that Indian feudalism tried its strength against the British rule for the last time in the rebellion of 1857. *Koshambi's* characterization of 1857 was shaped by the misunderstanding of its class character. However in some ways *Nehru* also agreed

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with *koshambi's* characterization of 1857 as feudal outburst. But Nehru added that though essentially it was a feudal outburst headed by feudal chiefs and their followers but aided by widespread anti- foreign sentiments.¹⁴

But the response of the oppressed peasantry of Northern India, who formed the recruiting base of the Bengal army, is no less. Eric stokes asserted the argument that the rebellion was essentially a rural revolt due to deepened economic crisis. High revenue policy impoverished the peasantry and created discontentment in rural areas. *Talukdar's* estates were liquidated. They wanted to restore their estates, and became staunch enemy of the British. After revolt from the army, they also joined the movement. Eric stokes in '*Peasants Armed*' and '*Peasants and the Raj*', highlighted disaffection, agrarian tension,discontentment among the peasants due to government land revenue policy and high revenue burden which culminated in transfer of land from the peasants. Muslim *shaikhs* of Bengal army who were given *mafi* land (revenue free) land by the previous Government were restored by the British and that policy had adverse effects. Peasants following their caste superiors and *talukdars* emphasized the elite nature of the revolt and in earlier works peasant's role was minimized. Later, Eric Stokes termed the movement as peasant revolt and looked at it as popular participation in *Awadh*.¹⁵

Marx, while writing his assessment of the rebellion also highlighted or underlined the rural roots of the revolt which gives insight about the rural tension. He was aware of the exploitation of Indian resources by the British.

It was reported in the British parliament that *zamindaras Talukdars* and peasants joined hands against the British in rebellion. He wrote an article on Canning's Oudh proclamation in which he spoke of dispute about *talukdar's* rights after the annexation of the Oudh, when their estates were liquidated. Marx was also aware of the discontent among the peasants but he did not give sufficient importance to peasants because he was not sure of their revolutionary potentialities. Peasants not only followed their caste superiors but participated due to their own discontent. R.P.Dutt in '*India Today*', saw 1857 as major peasant revolt. Similarly, the work '*Agrarian Relation and Early British Rule in India*' by *sulekh gupta* revealed that 1857 revolt was intense in those areas where peasants were discontented by the land revenue policy.¹⁶

Rudranshu Mukherjee in his work '*Rebellion in Awadh*,' has attempted to study popular peasant revolt due to rural discontent. He highlighted that peasants were the real strength of *talukdars* revolt. He quoted that ¾th population of *Awadh* participated in the revolt, reflects its mass character. Further, even when *talukdars* were pardoned and withdrew from the revolt, the general peasants continued to protest and faced the risk of death. *Tapti Roy* regional study, '*Mass Revolt in Bundelkhand Region*', has argued against territoriality component of 1857. Peasants did not remain confine to their local boundaries. She has also demonstrated in her work that they also

welcomed rebel leaders and rebels from outside and even they moved to urban centers to attack on the symbols of government's authority. Violence now collectively organized and was designed to achieve collective aims.¹⁷

The emergence of Subaltern Histories which sought to recover the histories of those marginalized in the extant literature, reinvigorated the historiography of peasant resistance in colonial India, leading to number of important local studies that helped to demonstrate the specific contextual nature of many incidents of rebellion and move the focus away from totalizing narratives that dominated many Colonial and Nationalist accounts.¹⁸

Gautam Bhadra in his article on '*Four Rebels of Eighteen- fifty-seven*', in *Subaltern Studies* volume 1v has focused on subaltern people who also participated in the revolt. He has rejected the usual elitist bias in the traditional historiography of the revolt and seeks to refute one of its central assumptions that mass of the population played little part. He argues that they had their own perception of British rule which was oppressive. They even had vision for alternative political structure, took independent initiatives of choosing leaders from among them who were respected and followed.¹⁹

Further, Tribal participation in the revolt in Chotanagpur, Central and Western India has been examined by Suresh K. Singh. It was the protest not only against the British government land revenue policies but against internal exploiters- *zamindars*, moneylender and traders who were seen as the agent of the Government. These outsider were termed as *diku* in their tribal areas *damin- i- koh*. British concept of private property eroded the traditional joint ownership in the Tribal areas – *khut kathi*. Their traditional culture, belief system, customs, values were disturbed dislocated, and exploited. They were charged with high rent and when they failed to pay, their land was grabbed by money lenders. Moreover, tribal women were ill-treated. They participated against the British due to internal discontent and exploitation through their own forms of protest with traditional arms spears and arrows .The sense of solidarity, religiosity provided them strength to fight the mighty British army.²⁰

Meanwhile, the search has been extended to the civilian population who joined the uprising in the urban areas in Bereli Delhi, Jhansi, Kanpur and Lucknow. Their main cause was unemployment due to annexation of native estates. Indian rulers were patron of art and literature and supported scholars, religious preachers *maulavies*. When they lost their lively hood, started spreading hatred against British rule. Large section of artisans, weavers were involved in luxurious trade. Due to industrial policies and pattern of trade, British cheap manufactured goods captured the market and ruined their handicrafts . In few cases doctors also participated from the rebel side. There was an extraordinary act of bravery among them which was seldom mentioned. Though the records of the resisters have been destroyed, whatever, little survived, indicate that the rebellion was also a battle of ideas.²¹

In most rebel proclamations unemployment, insult to Indian rulers and to women were presented as the cause of the revolt. Moreover, most of the pamphlets reflected the clash of knowledge. Europeans doctors were accused of polluting Indians with filthy treatments. It was asserted that the children in government and missionary schools were taught books that would alienate them from the prophet.²² The British were also accused of invariably selecting such passages and stories in compiling and printing historical works to bring contempt upon Hindu and Muslim religion. A document about proclamation by the *Mughal* prince *Feroj shah*, discovered in 1950, highlighted the grievances of different section of society and appealed to all rebels to join hands and also made certain promises to be fulfilled when *Badshahi* would be established.

However, a classic nationalist evaluation of 1857 came from Nehru in 1944 when he said, 'It was much more than a mutiny. It spread rapidly and assumed the character of popular rebellion and a war of independence'. In his 'Discovery of India', he called it a national revolt and though it was started as mutiny, but joined by masses and later assumed national character. V.D.Sarvarker also famously interpreted the revolt as the first war of independence. But R.C. Majumdar in '*Sepoys Mutiny; Revolt of 1857*', has expressed radical views. He said it could not be called the first war of independence as it was not planned and organized. It was limited to some parts of northern India. Assam, Orissa Rajasthan, hardly witnessed the rebellion.²³

The images which was sought to be instilled in to the Indian minds through textbooks of schools and colleges portrayed rebellion as aimless and meaningless. Very few Indians dared to write about the story of the other side of 1857, thus academic silence continued till 1947 except some brave work like Savarker's '*Indian war of independence*' which remained banned for long time.

However, the book written by Englishmen Edward Thompson and G.T.Garratt '*Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India*', challenged the earlier stereotypical works about the tale of the great mutiny and exposed with frankness the underside of the British activities in India. It presented detailed account of British atrocities in India which contrasted sharply in presenting the account of 1857, as even in the standard text books of those days like *Majumdar, Raychudhary and Dutta's* book '*Advanced History of India*', gives only passing references of the burning of the villages of Delhi. Though reference of British brutality in suppressing the revolt was used for exposure value but seldom find centrality in these narratives. On the contrary this book presents the sequence of cruel deeds of colonial political oppression, their false Justification for ruthless terror. Though it became the harbinger of flood of studies and debates later but was not taken in good taste by the authorities.²⁴

Similarly, '*The other side of the Medal*' is Thompson's bid to reverse the established British and Indian historiography. As an iconoclastic text on 1857, it has exposed how hatred against and discontent for

British rule penetrated at the grass root of the society. The core of the other side of the medal', is remembered for devastating exposure of British atrocities during 1857. With the memoirs of bloody suppression of movement, those British officers indulged in it were often boasted about their accomplishment in published letters and journals and that became the evidence data about British atrocities. Thompson tells us about the publicly blowing from guns of 40 prisoners at *peshawar* was ordered by Jhon Lawrence. Quotes from Robert's letters to his sister Darling Harriot, is valuable for exposure of how he ordered to hang the prisoners. Details of maximum horror with a long extract from Amritsar deputy commissioner Fredric Cooper '*Crisis in Punjab*' (1858) revealed that 45 prisoners were set up in small room in police station found dead and their bodies were thrown in by sweeper in to a well. He in his conclusion makes the point that such bouts of ferocity did not end suppression of 1857 as they had tendency to recur. With periodic acts of brutality, blowing of kuka prisoners from guns in 1872, at Kabul in 1879, and of course *jallianwala bagh* massacre in 1919.²⁵ Mutiny hero Nicholson and Neille became cult figure and many works eulogized them. Thompson's work is very rich in text and not based on archival sources but how he marshalled the facts are important. It exposed the wholesale account of massacre of civilians after each capture of the rebel strong hold.

Conclusion

Apart from the obvious fact, it was the struggle against imperialism, and an unusual moment in the development of the common peoples' political consciousness. Meerut rebels declared *Bahadur Shah*- the emperor, and the same declaration later by numerous regional heads was of a considerable significance. It was an act of political choice made by common people and by traditional political elite. Likewise the act of mutiny in the army and defiance of state authority by civilian population were acts of political choice. Such a deliberate choices of political kind were made by the common people in rare moments of our history – the uprising of 1857 was such a moment that is why it is memorable and has become a metaphor of Indian freedom struggle.

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