HISTORY OF INDIA VI (c. 1750-1857): Assignment

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**The Uprisings of 1857 – A Mere Mutiny or a National Revolt?**

-An Essay on the nature of the 1857 Revolt

*“The crisis came at first as a mere military mutiny, it speedily changed its character and became a national insurrection.” – G. B. Malleson*

Shekhar Bandhopadhyay opines that the English East India Company initiated army reforms from the 1820s to introduce a more universalised military culture. As the reforms in the 1820s and 1830s sought to establish a tighter control over the army administration and began to curtail some of the caste privileges and pecuniary benefits, there were acts of resistance, which continued into the 1840s. These incidents prepared the backdrop for the mutiny of 1857, the early signals of which could be detected in late January when rumours started circulating among the sepoys in Oum Oum near Calcutta that the cartridges of the new Enfield rifle, lately introduced to replace the old 'Brown Bess' musket, had been greased with cow and pig fat. Since the cartridges had to be bitten off before loading, it confirmed the sepoys’ old suspicion about a conspiracy to destroy their religion and caste and convert them Christianity. The cartridge rumour, which was not entirely devoid of truth, spread like wildfire in various army cantonments across the country. Although the production of those cartridges was stopped immediately and various concessions were offered to allay their fears, the trust that had been breached could never be restored. On 29th of March in Barackpur near Calcutta, a sepoy with the name of Mangal Pandey fired at a European officer and his comrades refused to arrest him when ordered by their European superiors. They were soon apprehended, court martialled and hanged in early April, but the disaffection of the sepoys could not be contained. In the following days, incidents of disobedience, incendiarism and arson were reported from the army cantonments in Ambala, Lucknow and Meerut, until finally, the Meerut sepoys started the revolt on 10 May.

On the afternoon of May 10, the 11th and 20th Native Cavalry of the Bengal Army, assembled in Meerut and turned on their commanding officers. From the sepoy lines, the uprising spread swiftly to the ordinary people in the town and the surrounding villages. The sepoys captured the bell of arms (a place where the arms and ammunition were stored) and then proceeded to attack and kill the white people and to ransack and burn their bungalows and property. Government buildings – the records office, jail, court, post office, and treasury – were all destroyed and plundered. The telegraph line to Delhi was cut. As the evening fell, a group of sepoys rode off towards Delhi and arrived at the gates of the Lal Qila (Red Fort) early on the morning of 11th May and captured it. Here, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, who had been reduced to being a pensioner of the English East India Company, was demanded that he give them his blessings. Surrounded by sepoys, Bahadur Shah had no other option except to accede to their demands. Thus the rebellion could now be carried forward in the name of the emperor, acquiring a legitimacy. He was proclaimed the Emperor of Hindustan and leader of the rebellion. Following this, the revolt spread to several other parts of India.

The Revolt of 1857 was fundamentally different from earlier instances of rebellion by the soldiers in the 19th century because prior to this, the mutinies had remained sporadic or were localised. However, unlike these, the scale and spread of the Revolt of 1857 was larger - sepoys at many centres mutinied and this was accompanied by civil disturbances. The extent of the revolt was mostly over North, Central and Western India. Southern India, Punjab and Bengal did not witness any serious disturbance. Some of the leaders of the revolt were - Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the Peshwa Baji Rao II at Kanpur; Begum Hazrat Mahal at Lucknow; Khan Bahadur at Rohilkhand; Rani Lakshmibai at Jhansi; the zamindar, Kunwar Singh at Arrah; and Tantia Tope at Bareilly

The nature of the Revolt of 1857 has been extensively written about and debated from started almost instantaneously as it happened. Some contemporaries thought it was a Muslim conspiracy to restore the Mughal Empire; though this lacked evidence. Others have called it a sepoy mutiny, a civil rebellion, a ‘National War of Independence’ and even a feudal uprising.

Yet, even as early as July 1857, Disraeli questioned whether the possible character of the revolt was indeed national. "Is it a military mutiny, or is it a national revolt?"-asked Benjamin Disraeli in the House of Commons on 27 July 1857. He said that the revolt was a conspiracy that had been brewing for a long time and that the Indians were merely waiting for a pretext or occasion. He saw the alienation of the subject population by the British, and the alienation of the propertied classes due to annexation, especially Awadh, and finally their tampering with the religion of the masses as the chief causes for the outbreak of the revolt. Karl Marx in the summer of 1857 expressed the same doubts in the pages of New York Daily Tribune: "what he [John Bull] considers a military mutiny", he wrote, "is in truth a national revolt". J.W. Kaye, the chief historian of the mutiny as Eric Stokes calls him, also argued that the explosion came from deep within the civil society and the British had alienated the aristocracy and the priesthood while failing to reconcile the peasant proprietary classes.

In dealing with the controversy on the interpretation of the nature of the revolt, three basic issues arise – firstly, whether the revolt was a civil rebellion or a sepoy mutiny; secondly, whether it was a revolt or the first War of Indian Independence; and thirdly, whether it was elite or popular in character. This essay will now attempt to review these issues. However, while arriving at a conclusion, the problems in studying the revolt must be kept in mind. Given the vast and heterogeneous character of the people involved in the revolt, it is difficult to form any conclusions that will apply even in a general way to all. More importantly, the rebels themselves have left no accounts of their activities and we are thus dependent mostly on the accounts of the British. Also, the personal prejudices and aims of the scholars involved also make it difficult to analyse the nature of the revolt.

The first issue relates to the characterization of the Revolt of 1857 as a mere military mutiny or a civil rebellion. The official British version was that the Bengal Native Army had alone mutinied and that any civil disturbances were the natural by-products of the breakdown of law and order. Civilian officials indicted the army officials for long-standing indiscipline and inefficiency that had rendered the Bengal Army mutinous. They refused to acknowledge the existence of any deep-seated discontent against the British Rule. The British mercantile community, however, placed the blame on Governor-General Canning and his officials for failing to recognize the fact that they were facing a formidable civil rebellion. G.B. Malleson agreed, saying that the administration “persisted in governing as though there was no disorder in the civil districts”.

For T.R. Holmes, however, the civil rebellion was a secondary phenomenon, as a general outbreak that promised the unruly and discontented elements with an outlet “for gratifying their selfish instincts”. Shekhar Bandhopadhyay also writes of “civilian unrest being a secondary phenomenon, which happened as the unruly elements took advantage of the breakdown of law and order.” R.C. Majumdar's thoughts are also identical: "What began as a mutiny", he thinks, "ended in certain areas in an outbreak of civil population", which was sometimes organised by self-seeking local leaders and sometimes was only "mob violence" caused by the breakdown of the administrative machinery. He agreed that the civil disturbance arose in the political vacuum caused by the military mutiny.

Eric Stokes also holds that the Revolt of 1857 began as a military mutiny but was converted into a civil rebellion, as with the breakdown of the British authority, peasant grievances surfaced in the form of rural rebellion. He, however, maintains that the military mutiny and rural rebellion were not coordinated. Consequently, the sepoys made no attempt to lead the rural revolts but rather concentrated in the three urban centres of Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur.

Talmiz Khaldun has criticized the labelling of the revolt as a mere sepoy mutiny for it fails to explain why at several places there were civilian revolts even before the sepoys had mutinied. Moreover, he argues that “if it was a purely military insurrection, why was it deemed necessary to punish the country people and citizens by fines and hanging for complicity in acts which they of their own accord had nothing to do?” The British retribution was severe – not only was martial law proclaimed, but civilians suspected of complicity were severely punished after summary trials. Instead, he says that it was a civil rebellion, which spread from Delhi in the North-west to Bihar in the East, and from the foothills of the Himalayas to Jhansi. Excepting the western-educated intelligentsia and certain sections of zamindars, the rebels had the support of the country people. Official papers recount how villagers fed the rebels and brought them hourly information in Awadh. Several villagers also joined the rebels’ army. Also, some districts saw prolonged resistance to the British, even after their re-occupation by the British e.g. Sambalpur and Chakradharpur on the borders of Bengal.

In nationalist historiography, there is a tendency to gloss over the activities of the sepoys, in order to prove that 1857 was much more than a mere mutiny. Thus, S.B. Chaudhuri calls it a “rising of the people”. That the sepoys struck the first blow is not denied, but their fears about British intentions to destroy their caste and religion must also have troubled the civilian population. When the sepoys had attained a certain measure of success, civil elements put themselves at the head of the movement, with the result that the military complexion of the insurrection was changed and it resulted in popular disturbances. He also provides evidence to show that people in general were in sympathy with the rebels. For example, the villagers did not betray their rebel leaders and kept them acquainted with the movement of the enemy troops. Military communications bear out the fact that the British punitive forces were constantly misled and misinformed as they went out to elicit information about the rebels.

R. Mukherjee has argued that both these approaches – whether a civil rebellion or a sepoy mutiny - are flawed, since they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of sepoy action, thereby also missing the crucial interconnections between the sepoy mutinies and the popular rebellion. He sees a definite pattern in the geographical spread of the revolt. Regiments of sepoys in North India revolted once Delhi was captured by mutineers and soon the mutiny acquired a popular base, with the success of the mutineers. He points out the general characteristics that formed the actions of the sepoys – collectiveness as revealed in planning and coordination; a destruction that discriminated and extended itself by the logic of association; a violence whose chief modality was arson; and direct actions spurred on by rumours. Also, according to him, all these features have parallels with the general features of peasant insurgency in the colonial period. This similarity is explained by the fact that the sepoys of the Bengal Army were mostly drawn from the agricultural families of Southern Awadh and Eastern U.P. This common background also explains the easy communication across sepoy lines in North India and the similar reaction of the sepoys to rumours. The sepoys were ‘peasants in uniform’, and so when they rebelled they did so in exactly the same manner as the peasants in the villages did. Further, the sepoy-peasant continuum explains why the sepoys’ actions found such a direct and immediate echo in the countryside. Once the mutinies had struck and British administration had collapsed, the rebellion spread rapidly in the countryside. The common people were waiting for the mutinies to initiate the uprising.

Thus it can be said that the Revolt of 1857 began as a military mutiny but soon acquired a popular colour, especially in areas such as Sindh and North West Provinces. As the mutineers captured towns, cumulating in the fall of Delhi which was taken as the symbol of the fall of British authority in India, the countryside rose in rebellion. It should also be noted that the army as a whole did not join the revolt but a considerable section actively fought on the side of the Government.

Another question that is discussed is whether the revolt was a planned conspiracy or a spontaneous unorganized outbreak. In the 19th century, in the British narratives of the mutiny, the activities of the sepoys were written about as something disorderly and chaotic - the work of disloyal soldiery. Malleson claimed to demonstrate that the 1857 outbreak had a premeditated design at a level of leadership outside and above that of the sepoy regiments, a plot which misfired only in its actual timing. More recently, Eric Stokes has argued that the mutinies were “the work of a small minority; the mutinies were the product of ‘designing men” - a conspiring few substituted for collective action.

The story that chapattis were distributed over a large area in Northern India is used by some scholars to support to the theory of prior preparation and propaganda. There is also a similar account of the circulation of a lotus flower among the regiments of the Bengal Army. But there is no definite evidence to prove it. The meaning and significance of the circulation of chapattis was also not clear, even till today. But there is no doubt that the people read it as a sign of an upheaval.

R. C. Majumdar, after an exhaustive study of available official and non-official records, concluded that available evidence did not prove the existence of any political or military organization which “a general revolt or a war of independence necessarily implies”. Nor did it appear feasible that a conspiracy was conducted through the circulation of chapattis. So the revolt could not be considered a premeditated one.

R. Mukherjee proposes a new understanding about the organization of the revolt. He says that the revolt may have been sparked off by mutinies in the sepoy lines but a considerable degree of organization and administration went into maintaining the struggle. According to him, there was a pattern in the chronological order of the mutinies. The first outbreak takes place on 10th May at Meerut, after which the soldiers went towards Delhi. Between 10th and 14th May, there were no mutinies. It is only after the sepoys in Delhi had mutinied (11-12 May) that the other garrisons in North India suit, “as if in chain reaction”. Thus we see a contagion of movement facilitated by the fact that there was a degree of communication between the sepoy lines. Propaganda and rumour were cleverly circulated and, buttressed by an appeal to religious feelings, spurred men on to fight an alien order. The outbreak of the mutinies, according to him, was not chaotic or disorganized. On the contrary, the ‘sipahis’ showed a remarkable degree of planning and coordination in the way the mutinies were carried out. The mutinies began at a pre-appointed signal: in Bareilly, Lucknow and Meerut- the signal was the firing of the evening gun. Moreover, when Mangal Pandey opened fire, only one sepoy tried to stop him. They were thus conscious agents and their acts were marked by deliberation and planning. The destruction was not indiscriminate. Property owned, used or lived by the British was always the first to be attached, followed by government offices, post-offices, telegraph lines, records of the tahsil and jails as the most obvious symbols of British domination.Thus the Revolt of 1857 was not a mere spontaneous sepoy mutiny but an organized revolt started in the military ranks, which gave the opportunity for a civil rebellion.

Then there is another contention regarding the communal nature of this civil rebellion. British officials serving in the North West Provinces were convinced of the Islamic character of the revolt. Alfred Lyall, who served in the Bulandshahr district, wrote, “The whole insurrection is a great Mohomedan conspiracy and the sepoys are merely the tools of the Mussulmans.” It was felt that the old Muslim elite had conspired to ferment political rebellion among the masses. However, it must be remembered Muslims alone had not arisen in rebellion. Rumours about greased cartridges, forcible conversion to Christianity and other such instances created an alarm about a deliberate plot to despoil the religion of Hindus and Muslims alike. The people were convinced that there was a move afoot to destroy their caste and religion. The programme of reform and westernization so eagerly propagated by British administrators only fuelled such a belief. The British, and Christianity, by extension, were identified as the common threat to their familiar way of life. Thus religion served as the source of solidarity and fraternity, contrary to British expectations.

The other issue of debate is whether the revolt can be characterized as a ‘National War of Indian Independence’. Malleson said that the revolt seemed, at first, to be a mere military mutiny, but “speedily changed its character, and became a national insurrection”. This prepared the way for the nationalist interpretation by V.D. Savarkar in his ‘The Indian War of Independence of 1857’, published in 1909, where he saw “the brilliance of a War of Independence shining in the mutiny of 1857”. He claimed that the people had revolted to defend their *swadharma* (one’s own religion) and to win back *swarajya* (self-government). However it must be noted that his main attempt was to infuse Indian people with a desire to rise against the British. According to Eric Stokes, the work was written as a tract for the times. Thus it presented 1857 as a National War of Independence, to relive the glorious tradition of resistance against the British. Nationalist historians further popularized this interpretation, especially during the period of Indian freedom struggle, making 1857 to be the year when nationalist feelings, suppressed by British occupation, flared into violence.

However, not all Nationalist historians agreed with this view. S.N. Sen did not see it as a nationalist war, although he wrote that “what began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence”. Yet he was clear that there was no prior conspiracy and no question of a nationalist uprising except in the limited sense of local patriotism in Awadh.

R.C. Maujumdar too denied existence of nationalism in the revolt. He argued that only a narrow geographical region was affected and that the civil population revolted only when British authority and administration itself had broken down. Secondly, there was no coordination or common cause amongst the different rebel groups, who acted mostly for self-interest. Also, many ruling chiefs had remained loyal to the British and mostly ‘goonda elements’ (criminals) participated. Thus, the revolt could not be termed as ‘national’. Instead, he saw it as the “dying groans of an obsolete aristocracy”.

S.B. Chaudhuri countered Majumdar’s arguments to prove that nationalist feelings were indeed the driving force behind the upsurge of 1857, which had definite precedents in earlier uprisings and which anticipated the later struggle for national freedom. Criminal elements certainly joined in the Indian revolt as happens whenever law and order is threatened. But the majority were not robbers by profession but people of decent social status to whom the revolt appeared to be the only legitimate means of redressing their grievances. The destruction of ancient land system by so-called goondas turned the uprising into a social war of the rural classes against the new landed powers. The loyalty of the princely order only reiterates the universal rebellion that threatened their existence.

He argued that it was the civil rebellion that resulted in the subversion of the British administration. Moreover, the revolt was an organized one and except a narrow margin of the eastern, western and southern fringe of India, there was hardly any part of the country that did not witness any overt rebellion on the part of the people. Also, it can be seen that there was greatest dislike of British authority where it had not yet been long established, for instance Punjab and Awadh; and conversely, there was the least effort towards change in those parts of India which had longest been subject to British rule, e.g. Bengal and Bombay. Further, he says that the rebel leaders did not confine their activities merely to their respective regions but moved to the neighbouring areas to carry on the general struggle against the English.

According to him, the aristocracy of India was neither dying nor had it become obsolete. Through fighting for their lands and rights, the local landed chiefs still could function on a national plane since they brought together an alliance of the diverse people of all classes who made common cause with them in complete disregard of the forces of estrangement, which might otherwise exist in the social and economic life. Thus old feudal instincts and the anti-alien patriotism became mixed up in 1857 in a curious process. The insurgency was a ‘national’ outburst caused by intense economic and religious discontent.

Talmiz Khaldun also rejects the existence of a ‘national feeling’ in the modern sense due to the absence of a central organization and the narrow geographical scope of the revolt. He points out that the revolt affected only one-sixth of the total area of the country and less than one-tenth of its population. Moreover, he points out that a revolt suppressed with the active help of Indians themselves could hardly have been ‘national’ in nature.

Bandhopadhyay writes that it was not "national" because the popular character of the revolt was limited to Upper .India alone, while the regions and groups that experienced the benefits of British rule remained loyal. There were also important groups of collaborators. The Bengali middle classes remained loyal as they had, writes Judith Brown, "material interests in the new order, and often a deep, ideological commitment to new ideas”. The Punjabi princes hated the Hindustani soldiers and shuddered at the thought of a resurrection of the Mughal Empire. On the other hand, those who rebelled, argued C.A. Bayly, had various motives, which were not always connected to any specific grievance against the British; often they fought against each other and this "Indian disunity played into British hands. “There was no premeditated plan or a conspiracy, as the circulation of chapattis or wheat bread from village to village prior to the revolt conveyed confusing messages. The rebellion was thus all negative, it is argued, as the rebels did not have any plan to bring in any alternative system to replace the British Raj. "In their vision of the future the rebel leaders were hopelessly at odds", writes Metcalf; some of them owed allegiance to the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah, others to various regional princes. "United in defeat, the rebel leaders would have fallen at each other's throats in victory"

Hence we may conclude that though in many cases the revolt arose as a result of the personal grievances of local leaders, it acquired a popular character due to the general disaffection among the population against British institutions and practices. Patriotism had to be reinforced by an appeal to religious passion before the people rose. But one cannot argue for a “nationalist” sentiment in this uprising and a question still remains as to what extent was it a precursor to the Indian freedom struggle.

The third issue is the debate on whether the revolt can be characterized as elitist or popular in character. This is connected to the issue of whether it was a revolt against the combine of sarkar, sahukar and zamindar.

Scholars who have termed the revolt as popular emphasize the role of the peasantry in the revolt. They show that more than the action of disaffected rural magnates and gentry, it was the peasant masses that were at the forefront of rebellion. It touches upon the disturbance caused among the people by the fears for religion and caste, springing from British interference in customs like widow remarriage or sati. But one can question the impact these legal reforms had on the peasants. One must also see the effects of the introduction of the institution of private property rights in land. Under this system, if the landholder defaulted on his dues, his holding could be taken away or transferred to a new holder. The peasant, caught in a rigid tax system which required him to transfer a substantial portion of his produce to the state in cash payments and tempted by his new credit worthiness, it is supposed, fell into the hands of the moneylender and the forces of “mercantile and usury capitalism”. The outcome was transfer by mortgage and forced sale of land titles to urban merchant or money-lending classes. It was this loss of land rights that led to the revolt of 1857, it is argued. In fact, so struck were many senior British officials by the agrarian character of the uprising that in the immediate post-Mutiny years, discussions were carried on to restrict the power of land transfer.

Talmiz Khaldun says that the revolt was crushed so easily precisely because the propertied class betrayed it. Thus, the rebellion ended as a peasant war against indigenous landlordism and foreign imperialism. This implies that it was a revolt against the sarkar, sahukar and zamindar. Even Rudrangshu Mukherjee agrees with this view.

Such an interpretation, however, strips the movement of all the claims to proto-nationalism and has found little favour. Even the Marxist scholar P.C. Joshi points out that the peasantry attacked only the new British-created landlords. There was no struggle against the landlords as a class, so it cannot be called a class war. Here he is in agreement with the non-Marxist S.B. Chaudhuri, who says that the public sale of land rights for default of revenue uprooted the ordinary people from their small holdings and destroyed the gentry of the country, and thus both the orders united in the revolt against the British, to recover what they had lost.

Thomas Metcalf agrees that 1857 was a broad, popular uprising directed against the new landlord class. According to him, as a result of the agrarian grievances arising from British over-assessment and the passage of landed property to the moneylender, the people of the North West Provinces gave their support to the rebel cause. However, the revolt can be called popular only in Awadh, where the talukdars and peasants participated together in favour of the royal court.

An example of how local and caste factors gave a unique character to the revolt in each region is shown by Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s study of the revolt in Awadh. A specific characteristic of the revolt here was that it pertained to the people as a whole and was carried on by the people, especially talukdars and peasants who fought together against a common foe. This he explains in terms of the role of the peasant and talukdars in the revolt and analyses the relationship between these two classes in the pre-annexation period and shows how they had a complementary and symbiotic relationship. Mukherjee argues that forms of practical cooperation between various strata of rural society were in-built within the functioning of Awadh rural society. He goes on to show that the Summary Settlement of 1856-57 alienated both the classes, as they dispossessed the talukdars and exposed the peasants to over-assessment. The dispossession of talukdars meant not only a loss of power and status but also the loss of control over surplus from which such power and status grew. It also meant a threat to a certain lifestyle that held together, however loosely, the talukdar retainer and the peasant. As a result, they joined hands to restore the rule of the Nawab in Awadh.

Keeping in mind the difficulties involved in the study of the Revolt of 1857, the controversy about the exact nature of the revolt continues. In the light of available evidence, we can conclude that the uprising of 1857 was not a mere sepoy mutiny since many other sections of the population participated. The revolt cannot be conveniently termed the FirstWar of Indian Independence for such a definition requires evidence that it was a pre-planned political and military uprising, organized with the aim of overthrowing the British. But evidence shows that it took place not due to careful planning or the conspiracy of a few individuals or groups – it had its origin in sepoy discontent and derived its strength from the widespread disaffection among the civil population. Modern nationalism did not yet exist. However, there was a sense of the British being foreign. The debate on whether it was elitist or popular requires a case study of each region to be undertaken sequentially. The work of Ruudrangshu Mukherjee on Awadh bears testimony to the fact that this aspect requires more extensive regional research. In fact, of the rebellion as a whole, it is not quite easy to present a uniform pattern as it differed considerably from region to region, and political and social motives got mixed up in the process. To wind up the arguments, we quote C.A. Bayly - “The Indian Rebellion of 1857 was not one movement, be it a peasant revolt or a war of national liberation; it was many. The lineaments of revolt differed vastly from district to district, even village to village, and were determined by a complex counterpoint reflecting ecology, tenurial forms, and the variable impact of the colonial state”.

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