

The 1857 Revolt



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Lesson: The 1857 Revolt

Lesson Developer : Dr. Rudrangshu Mukherjee
College/Department : Historian and Editor, Editorial
Pages, The Telegraph

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7.3: The 1857 revolt

The beginning

On the afternoon of May 10, 1857 the sepoys in the cantonment of Meerut broke out in mutiny. 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, 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.

The sepoys arrived at the gates of the LalQila early on the morning of May 11. It was the month of Ramzan, the Muslim holy month of prayer and fasting. The old Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, had just finished his prayers and meal before the fast began. He heard the commotion and he saw that the sepoys had gathered beneath his window. They told him: “we have come from Meerut after killing all the Englishmen there, because they asked us to bite bullets that were coated with the fat of cows and pigs with our teeth. This has corrupted the faith of Hindus and Muslims.” Another group of sepoys had entered the city and they began to kill Europeans and the rich and to plunder their property. They were joined soon by the ordinary inhabitants of the city. Some sepoys actually rode into the fort completely ignoring the court etiquette and they demanded that the emperor 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. It had acquired a legitimacy.



Figure 7.3.1: Bridge of boats at Delhi

Source: Getty images from Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. 2008. *Dateline 1857: Revolt against the raj*. Delhi: Roli.

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Pattern of the mutinies

In the following two days, May 12 and 13, North India remained quiet. Once word travelled that Delhi had fallen to the rebels and Bahadur Shah had blessed the rebellion, events moved very fast. Cantonment after cantonment in the Gangetic valley and some to the west of Delhi raised the flag of mutiny.

If the dates of the mutinies in the Gangetic plain are placed chronologically, it becomes evident that as the news of the mutiny in one station travelled to the next the sepoys there also mutinied. There was a general move eastwards from Delhi. Similarly, it is possible to discern a pattern in the sequence of events in every cantonment.

In almost every station, the sepoys began their actions with some kind of signal: in some places the firing of the evening gun and in some others the sounding of the bugle. They first seized the bell of arms and plundered the treasury. Their next targets were the various government buildings – the records room, the jail, the telegraph office – and then the bungalows. All records were burnt; everything connected with the white man became targets, including those who were perceived to be friends of the firangi (foreigner). Proclamations in Hindi, Urdu and Persian were issued in the cities calling upon Hindus and Muslims to unitedly fight and kill the British.

In the cities, like Lucknow, Kanpur and Bareilly, the targets of attack widened especially after the ordinary people had joined the rebellion. Moneylenders and rich were attacked and insulted. Peasants saw them as oppressors who were also allies of the British. What began as a mutiny quickly became a rebellion against authority and forms of hierarchy.

By the end of June, in the Gangetic plain, British rule had disappeared. Those Britons who had managed to survive the killings took shelter on the Ridge in Delhi, in the Residency in Lucknow and in the 'entrenchment' built by General Wheeler in Kanpur.

The similarity was rooted partly in a certain amount of planning and co-ordination that lay behind the mutinies. There is evidence that there was communication between the sepoy lines in the various cantonments. For example, after the 7th Awadh Irregular Cavalry had refused to take the new cartridges of the Enfield Rifle (the sepoys believed that these cartridges were coated with the fat of cows and pigs), they wrote to the sepoys of the 48th Native Infantry that "they had acted for the faith and awaited the 48th's orders". Sepoys, their emissaries, holy men like fakirs, moved from one sepoy line to another.

The point about planning and co-ordination immediately raises certain questions: how were the plans made, who were the planners and so on. The available documentation does not permit direct answers to these questions. But one incident offers clues to how mutinies were possibly planned and organized. Captain Hearsey of the Awadh Military Police had been given protection by his Indian subordinates during the mutiny. The 41st Native Infantry, which was stationed in the same place, insisted that since they had killed their white officers the Awadh Military Police should do the same or deliver Hearsey as prisoner to the 41st. The Military Police refused to do either, and it was decided that the matter would be settled by a panchayat composed of native officers drawn from each

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regiment. There is evidence that in the sepoy lines of Kanpur, panchayats were a nightly occurrence. There is thus the suggestion that decisions were taken collectively. Given the fact that the sepoys lived in lines and shared a common lifestyle and that many of them came from the same caste, it is not impossible that they sat down to collectively decide their own future.

The question of leadership

Once British rule had "collapsed like a house made of cards" (in the words of one British officer stationed in Lucknow), the rebels had to face the difficult question of consolidating their unexpectedly swift success. They had to decide what would replace British rule. This directly involved the question of leadership. The rebels almost always turned for leadership to those who had been in power before the coming of British rule. As we have already seen, the sepoys of Meerut had rushed to Delhi to get the blessings of the Mughal Emperor and thus give to their actions a legitimacy. Bahadur Shah's initial reaction had been one of horror and rejection. It was only when some sepoys had come into the royal quarters of the Red Fort and had surrounded him that he agreed, realizing that he had no options.

Elsewhere too, similar scenes, although on a minor scale, were enacted. In Kanpur, the sepoys and the people of the city gave Nana Sahib, the successor of Peshwa Baji Rao II, no choice but to become the leader of the rebellion. In Jhansi, rani Lakshmi Bai was forced by popular pressure all around her to accept the leadership of the rebellion very late in 1857. So was Kunwar Singh, a local zamindar of Jagdishpur near Arrah in Bihar. In Awadh where the annexation and the exile of the popular king, Wajid Ali Shah were fresh in the memory of the people, the people of Lucknow celebrated the collapse of British rule by hailing Birjis Qadr, the young son of the dethroned king, as their leader.

This turning to pre-British rulers had implications for the aims of the rebellion as we shall see. It is also important to add that in some places, the sepoys and the common people retained a degree of initiative in taking decisions on very critical matters. It is known for example that the decision to massacre the British at Satichaura Ghat in Kanpur (July 1857) was taken by a council in which representatives of the sepoys were present.

Rumours and prophecies

In the summer of 1857, sepoys and the common people were moved to action by alarm and panic which were fuelled by rumours and prophecies that circulated in north India. The sepoys in the cantonments believed that the cartridges of the Enfield rifle were coated with the fat of cows and pigs. The British officers tried to explain to their regiments that this was untrue but the rumour spread like wildfire across the sepoy lines arousing fears about loss of faith and caste.

The origin of this rumour can actually be traced. Captain Wright, commandant of the Rifle Instruction Depot, reported that in the third week of January 1857 a low caste worker in the magazine located in Dum Dum, near Calcutta had asked a Brahmin sepoy for a drink of water from his lota. The sepoy had refused saying that the lower caste's touch would defile the lota. At which he had been told, "You will soon lose your caste, as ere long you will have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of cows and pigs." There is

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no way to check the truth of what the worker said but once the rumour started there was no stopping it and the fear it produced.

There were other rumours too. One of these said that the British government had hatched a gigantic conspiracy to destroy the caste and religion of Hindus and Muslims. To achieve this end, the government, the rumour said, had mixed the bone dust of cows and pigs into the flour that was sold in the markets. In towns and cantonments, the sepoys and the common people refused to touch the atta. There was the fear and suspicion that the British wanted to convert all Indians to Christianity. Panic spread fast and despite the best efforts of the British there was little that they could do to stop the people from believing these rumours. These rumours stirred people to action. The call to action was reinforced by the prophecy that British rule would come to an end on the centenary of the battle of Plassey on June 23, 1857.

Rumours were not the only things that were circulating in north India in the first half of 1857. Reports came from various parts that chapattis were being distributed from one village to another. A person would come at night and give a chapatti to the watchman of the village and ask him to make five more and pass them on to the next village and so on. The meaning and significance of the circulation of chapattis was not clear and is even today not clear. But there is no doubt that the people read it as a sign of an upheaval.

Belief in rumours

It is not possible to check if any of these rumours were based on facts; some of the more extravagant ones clearly were not. What is important to students of history is that the people believed them. And people believed them because the rumours touched their fears and apprehensions. The circulation of the rumours was a reflection of the suspicion brewing in the minds of the people.

The circulation of the rumours and the belief in them begin to make sense when seen in the context of the policies the British adopted from the late 1820s. From that time, the then governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, began the policy of reforming Indian society through the introduction of western education, western ideas and western institutions. English medium schools, colleges and universities were established to teach western sciences and the liberal arts. The British established laws to abolish customs like sati (1829) and to permit the remarriage of Hindu widows (1855).

Giving pleas like misgovernment and the refusal to recognize adoption, the British annexed territories and principalities like Awadh, Jhansi and Satara. After annexation the British put in place their own system of administration, their own laws and their own methods of land-revenue settlement and land-revenue collection. The cumulative impact of all this on the people of North India was profound. It seemed to the people that all they held to be sacred and familiar – from kings to socio-religious customs to patterns of landholding and revenue payment – were all being swept aside and being replaced by a system that was impersonal, alien and oppressive. This perception was fortified by the activities of Christian missionaries. In such an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, rumours caught on and circulated fast and spread even greater fear.

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A study of Awadh

Some of the principal features of the revolt of 1857 are evident from events in Awadh where the rebellion came to acquire a popular character. The annexation of the huge territory known as Awadh happened in stages. It was first truncated when the Subsidiary Alliance was imposed on the Nawab. By the terms of the treaty, the Nawab also allowed British military forces to be stationed within Awadh and to have his administration monitored by a British Resident. Deprived of his own army, the Nawab lost his power to maintain law and order. The administration for all practical purposes was run by the Resident. The Nawabs of Awadh retreated into a life of leisure and conspicuous consumption.

In the meantime, the British became increasingly keen on acquiring Awadh. They saw that its soil was good for the cultivation of indigo and cotton. It was also ideally located to serve as a market. Moreover, by the 1850s all the major territories had been conquered: many of the Maratha lands, the Doab, the Carnatic, the Punjab and Bengal. The takeover of Awadh would complete the process of territorial annexation and would also help in Lord Dalhousie's project of expanding public works.

So in 1856, on the pretext of misgovernment, Awadh was annexed and its king Wajid Ali Shah was dethroned and exiled to Calcutta. Everywhere in India, annexation by the British had created disaffection but nowhere more so than in Awadh. The British had thought that Wajid Ali Shah was an unpopular ruler. They were wholly mistaken. When he left his beloved Lucknow, thousands of his subjects followed him to Kanpur singing songs of lament.

The sense of emotional loss was matched by immediate material losses. The removal of the king and the dissolution of the court and its culture meant that an entire range of people – musicians, dancers, poets, artisans, chefs, retainers, administrative officials – lost their livelihood. One contemporary observer writing on Lucknow recorded, "The life has gone out of the body, and the body of this town has become lifeless."

The annexation did not just displace the Nawab, it also dispossessed the taluqdars of the region. The countryside of Awadh was dotted with the estates and forts of the taluqdars who for many generations had controlled land power in the rural world. In the pre-British period, the taluqdars had built forts, kept armed retainers and had enjoyed a degree of autonomy so long as they accepted the suzerainty of the Nawab and paid their revenues regularly. Some of the bigger taluqdars had huge forts and as many 12,000 foot soldiers. The British were unwilling to tolerate the power of the taluqdars and had them disarmed and their forts destroyed.

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The first British land-revenue settlement in Awadh known as the Summary Settlement of 1856 further undermined the power and position of the taluqdars. The settlement proceeded on the assumption that the taluqdars were interlopers with no permanent claims on the land and that they had established their hold through force and fraud. The Summary Settlement removed the taluqdars wherever possible. Figures show that under the Nawabs the taluqdars had held 67 per cent of the total number of villages; by the 1856 settlement this number had come down to 38 per cent. The taluqdars of southern Awadh were the hardest hit and in certain cases lost more than half the number of villages they had previously held.

British land-revenue officers believed that by removing the taluqdars they would be able to settle the land with the actual cultivators of the soil and thus reduce the exploitation of the peasants and increase the amount of revenue coming to the state. In practice, this did not happen: revenue inflows to the state increased but the burden on the peasants did not decline. Officials discovered that large areas of Awadh had actually been over-assessed: the increase of revenue demand in some places was from 30 to 70 per cent. Thus neither taluqdars nor peasants had any reasons to be pleased with the annexation.

The dispossession of taluqdars meant the breakdown of an entire social order. The ties of loyalty and patronage that had bound the peasant to the taluqdar were disrupted. The taluqdars exploited the peasants by extracting various dues from them but they were also extraordinarily generous in times of need. Under the British this father-like figure was removed. In its place came an impersonal administration. Peasants were directly exposed to over-assessment of revenue and inflexible methods of collection. The peasants realized that in times of hardship the revenue demand would not be reduced and collection postponed. Neither would they get loans and contributions that the taluqdars had provided during times of festivals and mourning.

These grievances of the peasants were carried over directly into the sepoy lines because a vast majority of the sepoys were actually recruited from the villages of Awadh. Similarly, the fears of sepoys about the cartridge and the loss of caste and religion were also quickly communicated to the villagers of Awadh. As were stories of verbal and physical abuse that the sepoys suffered at the hands of the white officers. This link between the sepoys and the rural world was important. When the sepoys mutinied, they were quickly joined by their brethren from the villages. The mutiny became a rebellion.

Thus a chain of grievances linked prince, taluqdar, peasant and sepoy. In different ways they came to identify the firangi with the end of their familiar world. A whole complex of emotions and issues, traditions and loyalties worked themselves out in the revolt of 1857. These factors made the rebellion in Awadh the strongest and the most intense and popular. It was not before the summer of 1858 that the rebellion in Awadh had been suppressed and the countryside pacified. The fighting there was carried out by taluqdars who were loyal to begum Hazrat Mahal, the wife of the king; the taluqdars were supported by their loyal peasants.

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Figure 7.3.2: Interior of Sikandarabagh building

Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Image-Secundra_Bagh_after_Indian_Mutiny_higher_res.jpg

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Figure 7.3.3: Jawala Prasad

Source: Getty images from Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. 2008. *Dateline 1857: Revolt against the raj*. Delhi: Roli.

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Figure 7.4.4: Ruins of residency

Source: Getty images from Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. 2008. *Dateline 1857: Revolt against the raj*. Delhi: Roli.

The battle for Delhi

The British realized that to become masters of India and to restore the awe that was due to a ruling power it was necessary to reconquer Delhi. This did not prove to be easy. In Delhi, Bahadur Shah's acceptance of the leadership of the revolt gave to the organization of the uprising a sort of structure. The Emperor appointed his sons to positions of command in the army and sent off letters to the various rajas to march to Delhi with their troops to join the King's army in an attempt to overthrow British rule. Arrangements were made to provide the sepoys with provisions and to prevent looting. But the tensions between the popular elements of the revolt and its elite leadership were already apparent. The soldiers often did not pay heed to the orders of the Emperor and frequently spoke to him in terms and tones which had never been used before to address a Mughal Badshah.

From the end of May, tens of thousands of sepoys had entered Delhi and had camped there. The military and political objective was to attack and take the Ridge where the British garrison had taken shelter. But the indiscipline and the lack of effective command

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made this a long drawn out process despite the sepoys' superiority of numbers. This situation appeared to change with the appearance of Bakht Khan from Barreilly in late June. Bakht Khan secured the full confidence of Bahadur Shah and succeeded in establishing a modicum of order among the troops but he made little progress in securing the Ridge. The mood in the Royal Palace was turning to despair even as ghazis and mujahideen collected in the city to fight and die for their faith. The rebels lack of decisiveness in attacking the Ridge gave to the British the time to get reinforcements and to launch their attack on Delhi. The reinforcements came from Punjab and at their head was Brigadier John Nicholson.

Nicholson, even before his arrival in Delhi, had set the tone of British counter insurgency measures. He hated the sepoys and when the mutinies broke out, he wrote to Herbert Edwardes, the commissioner of Peshawar, "Let us propose a Bill for the flaying alive, impalement, or burning of the murderers of the women and children at Delhi. The idea of simply hanging the perpetrators of such atrocities is maddening."

Nicholson wanted to take the law into his own hands and to inflict the most "excruciating tortures" on the mutineers. He believed that "the punishment of mutiny is death" and he held very few courts martial on his way to Delhi. In the Gangetic plains, in the environs of Allahabad and Benares, on his way to Kanpur, Brigadier-General James Neill had already conducted operations based on the same principles.

While Nicholson surveyed his troops and prepared for the assault on Delhi, the skirmishes between the sepoys and the British continued. These encounters were always marked by ferocity as no quarter was given on either side and no prisoners were taken. From some pieces of evidence, it is clear that the fight against the British was not being carried out by the sepoys alone. British soldiers noted the presence of an ugly woman – "the fair maid of Delhi" they mockingly called her – who came out on horseback and "fought...like a fiend". A contemporary noted the frequent presence of two old withered Muslim women who "went far in advance with naked swords bitterly taunting the sepoys when they held back, calling them cowards.. These women frequently did bring cartridges to the men in the barracks and walked fearlessly in perfect showers of grape."

Ordinary people had joined the mutineers and this had brought a different character to the uprising. It was the popular participation that made the recapture of Delhi possible only after fierce fighting. It took six days (14 Sept to 20 Sept) of intense fighting following the first entry through the gates of Delhi before the British could declare that Delhi had fallen to them. Much of this fighting was in narrow lanes with houses that hid marksmen. Mutinous sepoy and ordinary rebel had become indistinguishable during the fighting.

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Figure 7.3.5: Bahadur Shah's arrest

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:%22Capture_of_the_King_of_Delhi_by_Captain_Hodson%22.jpg.

Suppression

The revolt of 1857 came as a rude shock to the British and they were surprised by its initial success. It was not easy for them to put down the uprising.

Before sending out the troops to re-conquer North India, the British passed a series of laws to help them suppress the revolt. During May and June 1857, through a number of Acts, North India was put under martial law; military officers and even ordinary Britons were given the power to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion. Thus the ordinary processes of law and trial were suspended and it was made clear that rebellion would be punished by death.

Armed with these laws and with troops and other reinforcements brought in from Britain, the task of quelling the rebellion was begun by the British administration. The British, like the rebels, recognized the symbolic value of Delhi. A two-pronged attack was begun. One force moved from Calcutta into the Gangetic plain and another from Punjab (which had by and large remained peaceful) moved to establish British authority in Delhi. The British began their onslaught on rebel positions in Delhi in early June, 1857 but the city was finally captured only in late September after heavy fighting and losses on both sides. One reason for this was the fact that the rebels from all over North India had come in to defend Delhi.

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The Gangetic plain had to be re-conquered village by village. This made the progress of British troops very slow. This forced the British to recognize that they were not dealing with a mere mutiny of the sepoy but a genuine uprising of the people. In Awadh for example it was estimated that three-fourths of the adult male population had joined the rebellion.

To reestablish their authority, the British used military power on a gigantic scale. They also tried to break the united resistance of big landholders and peasants by promising to give back to the former their estates. Loyalty was always rewarded with gifts of land. This ploy did not always succeed. Many landholders fought till the end and died in Nepal.



Figure 7.3.6: Sacking of Kaiser Bagh

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:British_soldiers_looting_Qaisar_Bagh_Lucknow.jpg

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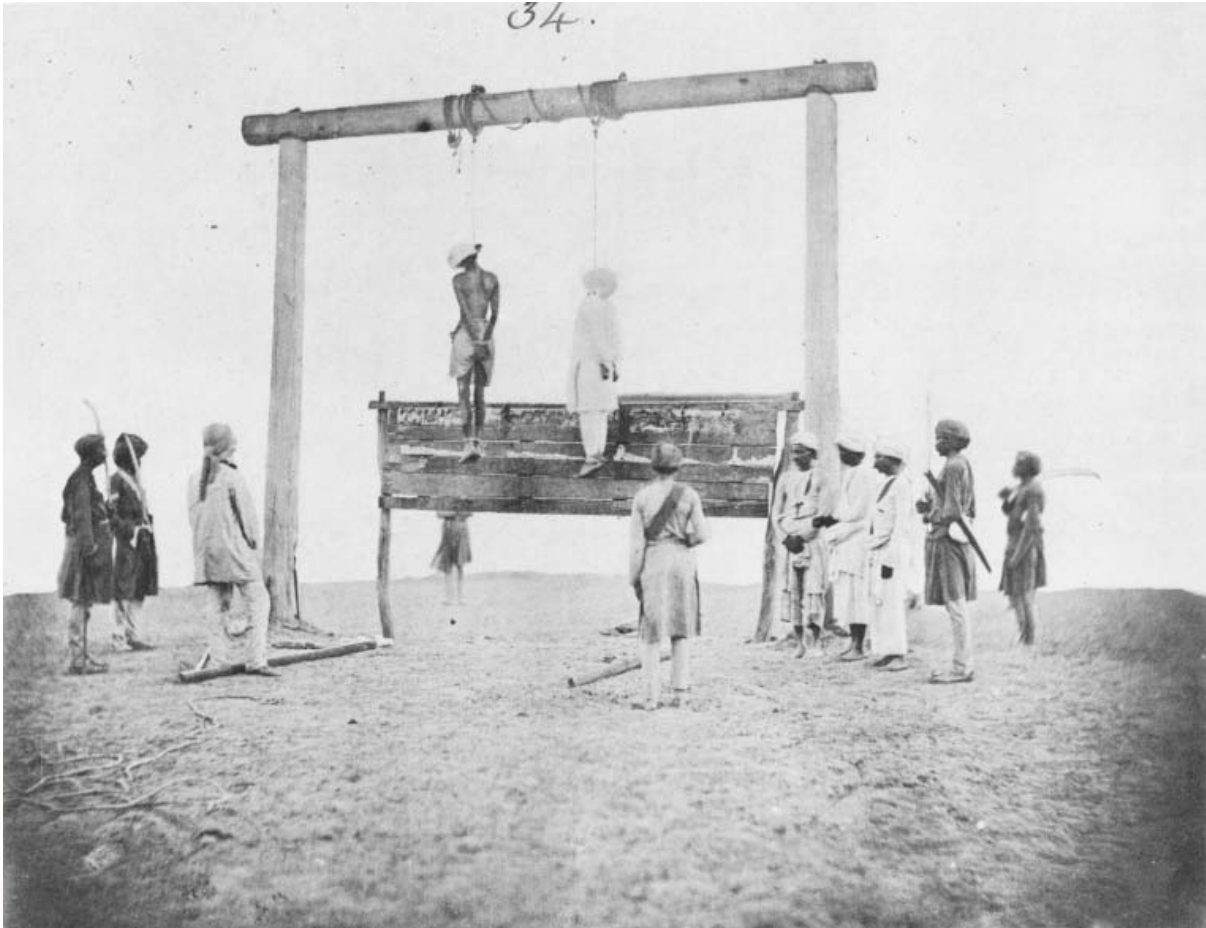


Figure 7.3.7: Hanging of a rebel

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Rebellion_Hangings.

Aims of the rebels

It is difficult to analyse what the rebels wanted because of the paucity of records and documents. The archives of the rebellion preserve the viewpoints of the victors. Those who lost, the rebels, had their voices silenced. Moreover, most of the rebels were sepoys and peasants who were not literate and therefore unable to record their version of events. Thus what we have are a few proclamations issued by the rebel leadership to propagate the message of the revolt and to urge the people to join it. This section looks at some aspects of these proclamations.

Call for unity

Running through all the proclamations was the theme of unity: all Indians irrespective of their religion, caste and creed should join the fight against the British. Many of the proclamations were issued in the name of Muslim princes but these never failed to appeal to the Hindus and to address their grievances. The rebellion was seen as one from which both Hindus and Muslims had equally to lose or gain. The proclamations harked back to the pre-British past and glorified the co-existence of Hindus and Muslims in that period. The British attempted to break this unity. In Bareilly in December 1857,

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the British spent Rs 50,000 to incite the Hindu population against the Muslims. The attempt failed.

Rejection of everything British

The proclamations attacked and rejected everything that they associated with the rule of the firangi. All the annexations were condemned and the British were attacked for breaking the treaties they had made with the rulers of the various principalities. It was made out that the British could not be trusted. The proclamations spoke out about the dispossession of the landholders and the ruin of the peasants and the artisans. Every action of the British was attacked. The British were seen as the destroyers of a world. The rebels wanted to restore that world.

The proclamations harped on the widespread belief that the British wanted to destroy the religion and caste of Hindus and Muslims and convert them to Christianity. They thus reinforced the rumours that circulated. There was an appeal to the people to come and fight to save their deen and dharma.

Alternative power

Once British power had collapsed the rebels in places like Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur attempted to set up some kind of structure of authority and government. These were marked by features of the pre-British political order. The culture of the court was reestablished. Appointments were made; efforts were made to collect revenue; and plans put in place to resist the British. In all this, the rebels harked back to the world of the 18th century that symbolized the world that had been lost.

The first priority of the short-lived administration was to meet the demands of war. These structures could not survive the British onslaughts for very long, but in Awadh, these hierarchies of command were evident even in late 1857. Within these command structures the sepoys and sometimes even the common people had a presence. Their presence sometimes led to attempts to overturn existing hierarchies and to attacks on the rich and on moneylenders. In such actions there was perhaps a glimpse of a different order.

Aftermath

The suppression of the revolt of 1857 brought about major changes at the level of administration. The fiction that the English East India Company ruled India was brought to an end and India was brought directly under the Crown. The India Act of 1858 made it clear that India would be governed by and in the name of the Crown. The latter would act through a secretary of state who would be aided by a council of 15 members. In India the central administration was vested in the hands of the Governor-General in Council. But by the Royal Proclamation of November 1, 1858, the Governor-General was given the exalted title of Viceroy.

These administrative changes were underpinned by radical changes in British attitudes which were reflected in British policies. The British now came to believe that they ruled India by right of conquest. They saw themselves as a superior race. Racism, never quite below the surface before 1857, became even more pronounced as Britons came to terms

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with the violence of the rebellion. British rule now enjoyed the illusion of permanence. Gladstone wrote to Northbrook, "...when we go, if we are ever to go."

This sense of permanence had to be bolstered by a network of dependable collaborators. Before the revolt, in the era of Bentinck and Macaulay, the attempt had been made to build such a class of collaborators from among the newly educated class of the English educated. Policy was directed against those who were seen to be representatives of the older order, hence the series of policy measures against the princes. Despite these some of the major princes – the house of Sindhia in Gwalior being the best example -- of north India remained loyal to the British. Vernon Smith, former president of the Board of Control of the East India Company, a man known for his dislike of Indian princes told the House of Commons in February 1859 that it would be "expedient, not only from motives of gratitude, but in order to secure the future well-being and tranquility of India, that some token of our approbation – that some reward – should be given to these men". He hoped that in the future India would be governed "by the sympathy of the native princes, carrying them along with us". (Metcalf 1964, 222) In a series of durbars held in 1859, rewards, monetary and territorial, were bestowed on the princes.

More important than the rewards was the adoption of a policy of conciliation of the princes. The Queen's Proclamation of 1858 had already announced that the Crown would "respect the rights, dignity and honour of the native princes as our own". In 1861, the Star of India was created as a special bauble for Indian princes and this was eagerly sought after. More substantial fare was the rescinding of the doctrine of lapse. The right of adoption was recognized. The princes were also given the assurance that the British had no desire to extend their dominions in India. The princes were thus guaranteed their independent existence and of the continuity of their lineage. They remained the strongest supporters of the British Raj till independence and even perhaps beyond.

The shift away from the products of Anglophone education was marked in the policy the post-revolt British administration adopted towards the taluqdars of Awadh. Popular resistance to British rule had been the most intense and the most enduring. This resistance had been led in most cases by the taluqdars who began deserting the rebels in the very late stages and after the British began to offer them rewards. But even rewards and the threat of confiscation could not prevent many taluqdars from continuing their resistance at the head of their peasantry. The experience of the revolt convinced many British officers that the taluqdars were the natural leaders of men in Awadh and they should be supported to act as collaborators of the Raj and the bulwarks of British rule in Awadh. The taluqdars, with a few exceptions, came back to their estates and reclaimed their position in rural society but the power equations had altered dramatically. A taluqdar's claims to his estate and the collection of revenues accruing from it was no longer based on some vague right based on lineage. His power was based on the recognition bestowed on him by the imperial power. In October 1859, Lord Canning, the viceroy, travelled to Lucknow where he met the taluqdars in open durbar and conferred their new titles on them. The taluqdars were given the right to collect revenue on behalf of the state and the more important among them were also allowed to act as District Magistrates with powers to settle revenue disputes. The taluqdar class built up by British rule emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as one of the major bulwarks of British rule in India. Rebellion had brought rewards even though the rewards had come with a diminution of autonomy and of power.

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There was thus a pronounced turn to the more conservative elements of Indian society. British policy worked to prop up and promote sections of society which belonged to a pre-British dispensation. The princes and the taluqdars were not in tune with the spirit of modernity that the British wanted to infuse into Indian society. Those that the British had created, the English educated elites in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, found it difficult to accept these new turns in British policies and priorities. They were to discover that despite their English education the higher echelons of the British-Indian administration were closed to them. They could only aspire to be clerks. All senior appointments in the civil service were out of the reach of Indians; even entry into the civil service by competitive examination was only theoretically open to Indians. The army had no Indian officers. The English-educated elite remained loyal but over the twenty-five years following the revolt, they became more and more conscious of the racism of the Raj and of its economic exploitation. British rule, they realized as a shock to their innocence, was incapable of fulfilling its own promise of freedom and modernity. They attacked British rule for being "un-British". From this consciousness of subordination, discrimination and exploitation, Indian nationalism would be born and would be led by men the British had endowed with the gift of English education. For these men, the goals of the men who had upheld the flag of revolt of 1857 were backward looking and alien. But it would not be too far-fetched to argue that without the violence of the rebellion, these unintended consequences would not have taken place.

India turned in 1857 but not in ways the rebels of 1857 wanted history to turn. The rebels had fought to free their world and their dharma from the British and had fought to restore their world to its pre-British shape and configurations. The old order had to sound its forlorn last post before the new men and women could set out their agenda to seek freedom from foreign rule. But memories of the revolt endured and the rebels continued to be remembered in folk songs during carnival time.

7.3 Summary

- The revolt of 1857 began as a mutiny by soldiers in Meerut and then spread through the entire Gangetic plain.
- Rumours played a major role in the spread of rebellion through the entire population in many of the areas affected by the revolt.
- Awadh was a major centre of the revolt. The dispossession and exile of the ruling Nawab, the undermining of the powerful taluqdar class, and the grievances of the soldiers of the Bengal army, many of whom were recruited from Awadh, all added up to general disaffection in the region.
- Overthrow of British rule and the restoration of the traditional ruling powers was the main aim of the rebels.
- The revolt was suppressed by the British by force of arms, often after a bitter struggle. The British slowly regained control by steadily re-conquering portions of territory.

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- The experience of the revolt convinced the British that it was a wise policy move to conciliate the traditional ruling order and to make it the bulwark of British rule in India.

7.3: Exercises

Essay questions

- 1) How did the rebellion begin?
- 2) Why did the revolt in Awadh acquire a popular character?
- 3) Is it possible to reconstruct the aims of the rebels?

Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Multiple choice question	1

Question

Which of these categories of people did not support the revolt of 1857?

- a) the peasantry
- b) the soldiers
- c) the English educated class
- d) zamindars

Correct Answer / Option(s)	c)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The English educated class broadly saw the revolt as a regressive movement, seeking to restore the old feudal order, and so did not support it.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

The revolt began with the mutiny of soldiers and soon spread to the peasantry from which the soldiers were recruited. The rebels then usually turned to the landowning and feudal ruling class for leadership.

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	Multiple choice question	1

Question

Which of these was not among the aims of the rebels?

- a) the overthrow of British rule
- b) safeguarding of the religion and culture of the people
- c) securing a more egalitarian social order
- d) establishment of parliamentary democracy

Correct Answer / Option(s)	d)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

At the heart of the revolt was opposition to British rule, which was seen as posing a threat to the religion and traditional way of life of the people. To some extent exploitative classes such as landowners and moneylenders were also targeted.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

The rebels did not have any conception of modern forms of polity, they broadly worked within a feudal world view.

Reviewer's Comment:

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7.3 Glossary

Firangi: foreigner

Panchayat: assembly of the villagers to decide on disputed matters

Taluqdar: landed magnate responsible for tax collection within a district. Taluqdars in areas such as Awadh enjoyed considerable administrative independence vis a vis the state.

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7.3 Further readings

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