

Hundred and Fifty years of the Revolt of 1857: A Historiographical Construction

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In the 150th years of the revolt of 1857, a good number of seminars have been organized at different parts of the country to commemorate the great event through the lens of hundred and fifty years. Voluminous literature, articles, monographs have been published on the various aspects of the Revolt. A project has been taken by the Indian Council of Historical Research to prepare an exhaustive bibliography of the works on the Revolt of 1857. In the year 2006, the number of collections had exceeded eight hundred. No doubt, the Great Revolt of 1857 is a much discussed event in our history¹. Even after 150 years, scholars are not unanimous with regard to the nature of the Revolt. There is scarcity of singularity in the interpretation and characterization of the uprising. This is partly because of the hypothetical proverb that “All history is contemporary history” and partly for the information mostly documented in the official records and also for the historian’s analysis of the matter from their own paradigmatic outlook.

After Independence, archival documents, letters, especially Rebel’s Proclamations, newspaper accounts have been published and are now accessible to scholars. Taken all the projections (as far as possible) on the subject, the present discourse will try to make a historiographical construction of the Great Revolt of 1857 in hundred and fifty years perspective.

Imperialist historians have documented the uprising as a ‘Sepoy Mutiny’² that was “wholly unpatriotic and selfish... with no native leadership and no popular support”³. To the colonial officials and writers, the Mutiny was the outburst of a group of discontented sepoys who were unhappy with the introduction of the new Enfield Rifle which required the bullet to be bitten off before loading. 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 to Christianity. Rumours spread among the sepoys that the grease used on the bullets was either from the fat of cow or pig which was prohibited both to the Hindus and Muslims. The cartridge rumour, which was not entirely devoid of truth, spread like wildfire in various army cantonments across the country. Although the production of these cartridges was stopped immediately and various concessions were offered to allay their grievances, the trust that had been breached could never be restored⁴.

On 29th March, 1857 Mangal Pandey in Barrackpur near Calcutta fired at a European Officer and his comrades refused to arrest him when ordered by the European superiors. Mangal Pandey was court martialled and hanged. Though there was no direct link between the revolt of Mangal Pandey and the revolt of the sepoys of Merrut, it may be said that the revolt of Mangal Pandey was the signal for the outburst of the discontented sepoys which later took a serious turn. Reports of disobedience, incendiarism and arson were coming from the army cantonments in Ambala, Lucknow and Merrut, until finally the Merrut Sepoys started the Revolt on 10th May, 1857. From Merrut the sepoys proceeded to Delhi where they proclaimed the ageing Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah as the Emperor of Hindusthan⁵. From Delhi, the uprising spread to other army centers in the North Western provinces and Awadh and soon took the shape of a civil rebellion. On 19th June, Lord Canning wrote, "In Rohilkhand and Doab from Delhi to Cawnpore and Allahabad, the country is not only in rebellion against us, but is utterly lawless"⁶.

Karl Marx traced the outburst of the Revolt and the anger of the people to the hundred years of colonial exploitation of India. Marx and Engels hailed the unity displayed by the different religious communities who opposed British imperialism. According to Marx "the Revolt of 1857 was not a military mutiny but a national revolt"⁷.

Surprisingly enough, the Bengali intelligentsia of the mid-nineteenth century was apathetic towards the Revolt. The pro-British attitude of these leaders and their social background was the basic reasons behind this apathetic attitude. The new middle-classes created under British rule saw no hope in the 1857 revolt⁸. They fully detached themselves from it and during the course of the rebellion exhibited their loyalty to British rule. In fact, as

Asoka Sen has observed that the educated Bengalis were convinced that the rebellion was retrograde in nature and so even secretly they never desired an end to the British rule⁹. The Hindoo Patriot, in a number of issues expressed its stern attitude towards the Revolt though Harish Chandra Mukherjee expressed his sympathy in his writings. In his publications of 21st May 1857 he wrote “The recent mutinies in Bengal . . . here from the very beginning have drawn the sympathy of the country . . . The mutineers have been joined and aided by civil population¹⁰. Sambad Prabhakar, the widely circulated daily also condemned the sepoy revolt¹¹. Most of the members of the young Bengal group opposed the 1857 revolt. Mention may be made of Shib Chandra Deb, Kisorichand Mitra, Dakshina Ranjan Mukhopadhyaya, Ram Gopal Ghosh and others. Even Maharshi Debendra Nath Tagore himself was indifferent towards the Revolt. Only a fraction of the Bengali intelligentsia tried to uphold the its spirit. Among them Rangalal Bandopadhyaya’s Padmini Upakhyan (1858), Michael Madhu Sudan Datta’s Meghnad Badh Kabya (1861) deserves special mention. Even, the leaders of the Indian National Congress, after its foundation (1885) was against the Revolt of 1857. Rajanikanta Gupta (1848-1900) was the first Bengali who has written the history of the Revolt in Bengali language. (Rajanikanta Gupta, “Sipahi Yuddher Ithihas” – V volumes). In writing the book he had collected his sources mostly from the official records. The book did not get the desired recognition from the historians and scholars.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the 1857 revolt attracted the attention and inspired the first generation of Indian nationalists. Thus it was V.D. Savarkar who was probably the first Indian who described the Revolt of 1857 as the “Indian war of Independence — a war fought for Swadharma and Swaraj”¹². It has been said that immediately after the Mutiny broke out among several of the Company’s sepoys, it speedily assumed the character of a countrywide patriotic movement in which the Hindus and Muslims fought side by side sinking their differences and undergoing various sacrifices.

Certain facts seem to strengthen this view. The leadership of the movement was almost evenly distributed among Hindus and Muslims. Thus for the Hindu Nana Saheb there was Muslim Ahmad ullah, for the Hindu Lakshmi bai, there was the Begum of Awadh. Active participants in the movement were both Hindus and Muslims.

Proclamation issued by Bahadur Saha and Nana Shah were meant not for their own community respectively, but were clarion calls for the defence of the country and religion which were dear to both Hindus and Muslims.

Post independent Nationalist historians like R.C. Majumdar, S.B. Choudhury, S.N. Sen and others did not accept the view that the Revolt of 1857 was “the First war of Independence” and the debate continued. S.N. Sen in his officially sponsored centennial history of the Revolt observed that the revolt started as a fight for religion but ended as a war of independence because the rebels wanted to get rid of an alien government and wanted to restore the old order¹³.

R.C. Mujumdar’s thoughts are also indetical with Dr. Sen. “What began as a mutiny” he continued” ended in certain areas in an outburst of civil population” which was sometimes organized by self-seeking local leaders and sometimes was only” mob-violence” caused by the breakdown of the administrative machinery. According to Majumdar, in 1857 nationalism in true sense was absent in India. So he concluded that as the revolt did not give birth to any national feeling at that time, it was not a ‘national nor a war of independence’¹⁴.

S.B. Choudhury, however, differs from Dr. Sen and Dr. Majumdar. He saw in the revolt” the first combined attempt of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power. This is a real, if not remote approach” he thought “to the freedom movement of India of a later age”¹⁵.

The debate has been going on since then, with a growing consensus gradually emerging that the Revolt of 1857 was not a nationalist movement in the modern sense of the term. In 1965, Thomas Metcalf wrote, “there is a widespread agreement that it was something more than a sepoy Mutiny, but something less than a national Revolt¹⁶.

Marxist historians’ perception of the Revolt of 1857 although, generally more or less unanimous, but on some occasions they differed. Scholars like M.N. Roy and Abani Mukherjee have explained the 1857 revolt as a struggle between¹⁷ the decaying feudal system and the newly introduced commercial capitalism, that aimed to achieve political supremacy. In contrast, Rajni Palm Dutt characterized the Revolt as a movement of self-seeking feudal forces which

as a whole lacked popular support. "The rising of 1857 was in its essential character and dominant leadership the revolt of the old conservative and feudal forces and dethroned potentates for their rights and privileges which they saw in the process of destruction"¹⁸. He categorized it as reactionary. To Hirendranath Mukhopadhyaya, the first signs of a national upsurge was visible in the revolt although it was not a national revolt in true sense as the concept of nation was absent in 1857¹⁹.

The Revolt of 1857 was also characterized by an outburst of peasant insurrections. Though the peasants do not have a history of their own, we cannot ignore the folklore and traditions of resistance associated with the Revolt. A very well-researched article by Talmiz Khaldun in a volume of 1857 edited by P.C. Joshi²⁰ argues that the Revolt turned into "a peasant war against indigenous landlordism and foreign imperialism, thus it was an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist movement"²¹.

P.C. Joshi, however, did not agree with the unjustified dilution of the anti-colonial character of the movement and the very unrealistic exclusion of the landlord classes from the rank of the rebels. The hundred years of British rule adversely affected all classes of people in India and the contradiction between imperialism and Indian people manifested particularly in those areas, where the Bengal Army Sepoys mostly come from. There was the high rate of land tax and there was always the possibility of forfeiture of the land rights of the zamindars. The annexation of Awadh had taken place in 1856 and the Talukdars, the great land magnates of Awadh were threatened with the imposition of the Mahalwari system that had ruined landed classes in the rest of the province. So both the peasants and the landed classes were the victim of oppression. The Revolt of 1857 was more than an agrarian war. People of cities also joined the rebellion. Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi and other towns became determined centers of resistance.

Eric Stokes, in his two monumental works²², has examined the mutifarious issues, social compositions and the role of the peasants, particularly the rich peasants. In his second book, Stokes, however reassesses his position by widening the social basis of the peasants' participation in the Revolt. He highlighted the land revenue policy and high revenue demand as reasons for the misery of the peasants. Rudrangshu Mukherjee in his study brought to light

fascinating complexities of popular militancy, that had hitherto remained ignored. So far as the taluqdars are concerned, it is true that in many areas peasants followed their leaders, because of the existence of a pre-capitalist symbiotic relationship between the two classes. But the role of the taluqdars varied widely from region to region and their participation was also not universal: Some of them remained loyal, some became turncoats, others followed a middle course and some submitted at the sight of the approaching British troops²³. Tapti Roy also enriches our understanding of the revolt by focusing on the popular level of the Revolt²⁴.

Prof. Irfan Habib, in his scholarly articles, recently published²⁵, categorised the Revolt of the sepoys of 1857 as the “largest anti-colonial uprising anywhere in the world in the 19th century”. He argues that there were “over one hundred and twenty five thousand of Bengal Army Sepoys going into armed Revolt”. Citing a statistics of the numbers of sepoys, Prof. Habib continues that “In terms of the percentage of the people inhabiting the rebellious territory involved, it consisted about thirty percent of the population of the territory of the present union of India”. thus “it was a major event in modern world Hisotry”²⁶. Prof. Habib categorically explained the discontent of the Bengal Army during the Revolt. For more than eighteen years before the outbreak of the Revolt these sepoys were constantly engaged in continuous warfare for the British colonial expansion. “It was in the process of this expansion that the Bengal Army seopys were continuously made canon-fodder, to fight and die in battlefields from Crimea to China”²⁷. The exhaustion of the Bengal Army in continuous warfare, deprivation in their service and day to day humiliation were the crucial factors for the Revolt of the sepoys. The introduction of the new Enfield Rifle added flame to the fire.

Prof. Rajat Roy has studied the mentality of 1857. In his book²⁸ Prof. Ray very comprehensively dealt with the mental attitude of the various sections of the rebels; whether sepoys or civilians, they joined the movement forgetting their religious differences which was unique in its character. Both the Hindus and Muslims came together to fight for a common cause against their common enemy — the British.

The historians of the Subaltern School brought to light fascinating complexities of popular militancy that had hitherto remained ignored. While discussing the popular resistance Prof. Ranajit Guha observed that insurgency was a motivated and conscious undertaking on

the part of the rural masses²⁹. Echoing the same voice Gautam Bhadra has observed that in all the earlier works on the revolt of 1857 the ordinary rebel, their role, perception of an alien rule and contemporary crisis remained absent. After a thorough discussion about the rebels Prof. Bhadra highlighted that the consciousness with which the rebels fought had been informed through everyday experience³⁰ Prof. Guha, in one of his major works, discussed the nature and character of the various peasant movements and observed that it is necessary to acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his/her own rebellion because this indicates a consciousness on his/her part³¹.

William Dalrymple in his book "The Last Mughals" high-lighted the role of the Muslims in the Revolt³². This is a much discussed book recently written on the Revolt. To Dalrymple, the Revolt was a "jihad" of the Muslim community. Historians like Sabyasachi Bhattacharya raised some pertinent question to call the 1857 Revolt a "jihad" of the Muslims. Prof. Bhattacharya pointed out that during the time of the outbreak of the Revolt, opposition and protest of various communities manifested in various ways, which can not be termed as 'jihad' or religions war of a particular community³³. In revisiting the Revolt of 1857 we should always keep in mind this historical phenomenon. In a recently published anthology edited by Prof. Bhattachaya³⁴ these diversified themes on the Revolt have been projected. The contributors in this volume look at the several aspects of 1857 in a different perspective hitherto discussed.

Kaushik Chakraborty, in his recently published book³⁵ has reassessed the history of 1857 revolt in the light of social deprivation of the people under colonial rule. To Chakraborty, since the beginning, the rebellion had a call of religion. So, to protect their religion the people responded to this call and participated in the rebellion. But the resistance of the people was against the political, economy and administrative system of the colonial state. Popular violence against the state and its political economy established that "in reality the rebellion was a political, progressive and secular movement". Religion gave legitimacy to the secular base of the movement.

From the trends in historiography so far discussed, their emerges three distinct phases. In the first phase we find the domination of the colonial or Imperial school of historians. In the second phase the focus shifted from colonial to Nationalist school and in the third phase we

find the popularity of the Marxist school of historiography. The analysis of the three schools are from different perspectives though the history of the outbreak of the Revolt are not different. The Subaltern school of historians investigated the history of the revolt from the point of view of popular resistance. Recently, gender related issues in 1857 is also getting prominence in historical research. Mention may be made of Charu Datta, Samita Sen and others. In the recently published volume of Indian Historical Review³⁶ Indrani Sen and Lata Singh have made their contribution in this unexplored area of the Revolt.

Biswamoy Pati, in his well-researched article³⁷ comments, “the 1857 Revolt represents possibly one of the most powerful and dramatic anti-colonial movements which united the peasants and the landed sections against the ruthless imperial oppression. At the same time, it also questioned the internal exploiters like the money lenders and buniyas”. What have been delineated above illustrates the evolution of the historiography on the 1857 Revolt. Thus historiography has accorded its own interpretation to 1857 — an interpretation that is changing even today-after hundred and fifty years.

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