



## REINTERPRETING: THE REVOLT OF 1857 – AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT :

*The revolt of 1857 has always been an interesting topic of discussion among the scholars, both Indians and foreigners. This paper is an attempt to study the different views expressed by some of these scholars.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Indians and foreigners, Indian historians.*

### INTRODUCTION:

As with most historical events, the perception about the causes and the consequences of the Revolt of 1857 has changed greatly over time. Indian historians have studied the event in more depth and detail with special interest in its impact in postcolonial period. The Revolt is no longer seen as merely a 'Sepoy Mutiny', as claimed by the colonialist writers but as major landmark in modern Indian history. It was not just a revolt by disgruntled Indian soldiers in East India Company but something much more than that. The revolt was first of its kind and had wider perspective. It was political, socio-economic, religious and also emotional cohesiveness that led people to rise up against the British rule. Resentment against the British rule had been festering for a long time and the 'grease cartridges' acted as catalyst for the events that followed.



### NATURE OF THE REVOLT OF 1857:

The revolt of 1857 was the most severe outburst of anger and discontent accumulated in the hearts of various sections of the Indian society ever since the inception of British rule in Bengal, following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Battle of Buxar in 1764. There were innumerable peasant and tribal revolts which broke out in different parts of the country, some of the prominent ones being the Kol Uprising of 1831, the Santhal Uprising of 1855, (Bipan Chandra 1989) and the Kutch Rebellion which lasted from 1816 until 1832. Dissatisfaction among the Indian soldiers of the British Indian army also had some history. Indian soldiers had grievances on economic, social and religious grounds. A significant mutiny to happen before the 1857 Revolt was the Mutiny of 1806 in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, South India which was brutally crushed by British officers and soldiers.

The Revolt of 1857 can be said as the culmination of all these revolts. Although the British suppressed these regional revolts, the resentment was still growing in the minds of the people. Their idea of freedom and self-rule could not be kept suppressed for long. This Revolt was different from other revolts in many respects; firstly, it involved people from different religions, both Muslims and Hindus fought side by side, secondly, the Revolt spread to other parts of India making it more than just a regional movement and thirdly, the nature of the Revolt was more like a national movement.

British historians called it a "Sepoy Mutiny" and the Indian historians, the first being VD Savarkar, termed it as the First War of Independence. Jawaharlal Nehru in his book "Discovery of India" described it as the Feudal Revolt of 1857 and added that "it was much more than a military mutiny and

it rapidly spread and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian Independence" Irfan Habib argued that The Revolt of 1857 was characterised by something more than 'regional patriotism.' It was nationalism, but a certain kind of 'Indian patriotism' that prompted the rebellious sections to join the revolt. (Irfan Habib 2007) <sup>1</sup> Some Punjabi historians have however opposed the use of the term "First War of Independence" by the Government to describe the 1857 Revolt and argued that the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) was and should be acknowledged as the First War of Independence. In May 2007, the Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker Charanjit Singh Atwal and three other MPs from Punjab protested against the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the 1857 Revolt over this issue.

Some South Indian historians have also opposed the use of the term, and have unsuccessfully taken the issue to the court. These historians insist that several other anti-British uprisings in South India, such as the Vellore Mutiny, had preceded the 1857 Revolt, and should be called the First War of Indian Independence. In 2006, when the Indian postal department issued a postal stamp to commemorate the Vellore Mutiny of 1806, M. Karunanidhi, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, said that the move had given "due recognition" to India's "first war of independence". Some Indian writers also insist that none of the armed uprisings against the British in India, including the 1857 uprising, should be termed as a "war of independence", since they were not national in character, and were not motivated by nationalist sentiments. This is also the view commonly held by most standard historiography and internationally.

Though the revolt was started by the Indian soldiers in the service of the East India Company army on the 10th of May 1857, in the town of Meerut, it soon proliferated all over the country. The soldiers marched to Delhi and declared Bahadur Shah 11 as the emperor with the title of Shahenshah-e-Hindustan (Bipan Chandra 1989). The Mughal rule represented Hindustan as one nation. Thus, the feeling of one nation had started to take place giving the Revolt a nationalist character (Metcalf Charles Theophilus (1988)). We must not forget that millions of peasants, artisans and soldiers fought heroically for over a year and many sacrificed their lives so that the others might live in free Hindustan. Moreover, the sepoys carried the burden of the distress of the civil population as they were, peasants in uniform (Stokes, Eric 1986).. Hindus and Muslims kept their religious differences aside and fought together in order to free themselves from foreign subjugation.

On March 29, 1857 at the Barrackpore parade ground, Kolkata, 29-year-old Mangal Pandey of the 34th BNI, angered by the recent actions by the East India Company, declared that he would rebel against his commanders (Dalrymple William 2007). When his adjutant Lt. Baugh came out to investigate the unrest, Pandey opened fire but hit his horse instead. Thus, the revolt also started in Bengal.

### **The Argument on the Nature of the Revolt:**

The Revolt of 1857 needs to be studied through the aspect of nationalism the specificity of Indian / Hindustani nationalism is obvious when we analyze this event. In fact the nationalism that emerged and developed in India was quite distinct and different from the Western world. In Western countries it emerged simultaneously with the growth of economies, increase in its market share as well as introduction of capitalism. In this context one needs to ask whether by then Hindustan had already, become a fully capitalist country under the colonial rule or that the transformation to capitalism playing a dominant role was in its early stage.. Furthermore, did Indian feudalism and capitalism co-exist thereby skipping the historical phase of development of capitalism at the cost of feudalism?

It is true that the colonialism, which mediated through company government, failed to introduce capitalism on a war footing and in a uniform manner throughout the country. In fact, what Karl Marx said about the destructive role of capitalism holds good for the way capitalism was introduced in Hindustan. Marx had argued that capitalism had twin task: one Progressive and the other Destructive. In Indian context, capitalism was not the harbinger of progress and prosperity as it was within the

<sup>1</sup> Irfan Habib coordinated the symposium, at 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the Indian history Congress from 10-12 March, 2007.

larger framework of liberalism in the Western world. In India it became oppressive and exploitative. Colonialism did it through different mechanism: introducing new social relations or land structures such as Ryotwari, Zamindari and Mahlwari; selective industrialization, imposing heavy taxes and revenues on the peasantry, making land a private property, etc. This way colonialism failed to create deep rooted, progressive and beneficial capitalism in India. In the process it compromised as well as co-existed with the feudal structure. This period can be construed as a period of rising capitalism though skewed, lopsided, uneven and weak. This is the reason why in Indian / Hindustan context the nationalism did not emerge out of strong and dominant capitalism. Rather Indian nationalism emerged against the colonial/Company exploitation and colonial rule. Marx clearly identified the destructive nature as well as the emergence of new nationalism in the exploitation of peasantry, conversion of land into private property, destruction of industries as well as Asiatic mode of Production, increasing number of draught and famines as well in the destruction of productive forces.

From the 1920s, endeavors were made to examine the Revolt from a Marxist position by pioneers like M.N. Roy, Abani Mukherji, and Rajni Palme Dutt. Marx who was writing on the Revolt from London had written that Indians, both Muslims and Hindus, stood united and that though there were many mutinies in the Indian army but the present Revolt was distinguished by characteristics and fatal features. Muslim and Hindus renouncing their mutual antipathies had combined against the common master, that disturbance began with Hindus and had actually ended in placing on the throne of Delhi a Muslim Emperor and that the Revolt was not confined to a few locations (S.N. Sen 1991). Same year The London Times wrote “we may assume in the rebellion of 1857, no national spirit was roused, but we cannot deny that our efforts to put it down have sown the seeds of a new plant and thus led the foundation for more energetic attempt on the part of the people in the course of future years”. So this makes it very clear that the sense of nationalism was there at the time of Revolt of 1857 (S.N. Sen. 1991). Also in the later years one British officer, Aitchison acknowledged, “in this instance we could not play off the Mohammdans against the Hindus”. Canning also noted and recognized the nature of the Revolt and said “The struggle which we have had has been more like a national war than a local insurrection”. Thus it would be wrong to say that the nature of the Revolt of 1857 was not national. Roy was fairly cavalier around 1857 and found in its disappointment the breaking of the last remnants of primitive power. He was vehement about the 'upheaval of 1857' being a battle between the exhausted primitive framework and the recently presented business private enterprise, that planned to accomplish political matchless quality. Interestingly, Palme Dutt saw 1857 as a noteworthy laborer revolt, despite the fact that it had been driven by the rotting primitive powers, battling to get back their benefits and turn back the tide of outside control. Thus, one observers the beginnings of a procedure that cross examined and scrutinized the inside medieval request, while commending the well known premise of the Revolt.

The entrance to sources after the autonomy of India saw intriguing improvements identified with the investigations on the 1857 Revolt. What created was a somewhat advanced Nationalist historiography that nagged the complexities of the Revolt. It included Nationalist students of history like R.C. Majumdar, S.B. Chaudhuri, S.N. Sen, and K.K. Datta, (viz. R.C. Majumdar, The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857, 1957; S.B.Chaudhuri, Civil Revolt in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-59, 1957 and Theories of the Indian Mutiny, 1965; S.N. Sen, Eighteen Fifty-Seven, 1957; and, K.K. Datta, Reflections on the Mutiny, 1967). These antiquarians were not consistently OK with the possibility that the 1857 Revolt was the 'Main War of Indian Independence'. Besides, they alluded to thoughts like patriotism that were evidently seen amid 1857 or saw the very origin of the national development contained in the Revolt. By the by, they went in all respects obviously past the basic orders that had seen two prevailing and contradicting stories – praising the British, the victors who had 'won' the war and the cases of the 'defiant Indians', who had been 'vanquished'.

This implied a move in center, with endeavors being made to find the inward logical inconsistencies (viz. the Indian 'rich', which incorporated the moneylenders and buniyas) (Arjun Appadurai, 1996) and the well known premise of 1857 and not focus simply on the powerful classes which had been the focal point of contemporary British authorities. It is here that Nationalist

historiography dealt with and built up the inheritance of the Marxists, even as some Nationalist antiquarians engraved their objection to considering it to be the 'Main War of Independence'. In this sense at any rate, the Nationalist students of history agreed a space – howsoever restricted to the prominent base of the Revolt.

Since laborers did not compose their narratives, they didn't record their association with the 1857 Revolt. In any case, is it conceivable to disregard the legends and conventions of obstruction related with the 1857 Revolt? In addition, would one be able to stand to disregard the associations among 1857 and the laborer rebellions of the former years, or those outside the northern area of India? One can for instance allude here to the Revolts of the Bhills in 1852 in Khandesh, Dhar and Malwa, the Santals in 1855-6 in Rajmahal, Bhagalpur, Birbhum, the Mapillas over the 1836-1854 period in Malabar, the Kandhas in Ghumsar and Baudh (1855-60), the Savaras of Parliakhemedi (1856-7), or so far as that is concerned the Indigo Revolt in Bengal that started in 1859 and was coordinated against white grower – in spite of being informed more than once regarding the job of the Permanent Settlement and the *bhadraloks*, that as far as anyone knows left Bengal as a 'zone of harmony' in this stage.

Except if one finds verifiable procedures in a limited, true way, it would be in reality practically difficult to accept that workers can't think or fuse segments from the past while battling against pioneer rule just as their quick oppressors. In this sense at any rate, it is hard to consider the Revolt except if one considers the social history of worker challenge preceding 1857 and in the stage after it. This would demonstrate the laborers in an unpleasant enemy of colonialist political battle, where the interior exploiter as the *sahukar* or *buniya* was not saved. It would likewise undermine a point that has nearly got solidified as presence of mind – viz. that the effect of the Revolt was not felt outside the Gangatic plain.

With the progression of time the advancement of other chronicled approaches produced a ton of discussions on the idea of 1857 among students of history. The main thorough work on the Revolt was distributed in 1957 to recognize the 100th commemoration of the occasion by P.C.Joshi "1857: A Symposium", which concentrated on both the assorted varieties and the specificities of the 1857 Revolt. This included surveying 1857 against the frontier scenery, analyzing parts of support and concentrating significantly on the inside logical inconsistencies. This volume additionally tried to feature measurements of mainstream culture by consolidating society sonnets that have endure.

From various perspectives this work propelled a genuine spell of compositions on the Revolt. Here notice must be made of Eric Stokes who inspected issues running from the manner in which the idea of 1857 was molded by the foundation, the statistic and natural highlights to the social structure and the job of the laborers, particularly the 'rich' (Eric Stokes 1986). Curiously, his exploration guided Stokes to reassess his position. Along these lines, though in his first work he had concentrated on the 'rich' laborer initiative and activation, in *Peasant Armed* Stokes extended the social premise of the workers' interest in the Revolt as they were specifically identified with land and most endured class in the general public.

Additionally students of history like Iqtidar Alam Khan have examined questions identified with association in his book "The Gwalior Contingent in 1857-58: A Study of the Organization and Ideology of the Sepoy Rebels". Different researchers, for example, Gautam Bhadra and Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri have concentrated on the center dimension authority in their work, 'Four Rebels of Eighteen Fifty Seven'. Researchers like Khaldun and E.I. Brodtkin have concentrated on exercises in the zones where British specialist had been subverted, and if 1857 was to be sure a remedial revolt. All the more as of late – since the 1990s – students of history have concentrated on the well known components of 1857. Here one can allude to researchers like K.S.Singh who has featured the interest of Adivasis in his book "The Tribals' and the 1857 Uprising" and Badri Narayan who has concentrated on low and outcaste and mainstream culture.

### End:

What should be stressed is that the 1857 Revolt speaks to perhaps a standout amongst the most dominant and sensational enemy of pioneer developments, which joined the workers and the landed



upper class against the merciless colonialist invasion over the main portion of the nineteenth century. In the meantime, it likewise scrutinized the interior exploiters like the moneylenders and buniyas. What has been depicted shows the advancement of the historiography on the 1857 Revolt. What was first considered as “Sepoy Mutiny” was later credited with being the origin of Indian nationalism and was studied for the diversification in terms of the popular participation and the multiregional support and the internal contradictions. Directly a few history specialists are occupied with inquiring about sexual orientation related issues, which would without a doubt improve our comprehension of the Revolt of 1857.

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