



END OF COMPANY RULE IN INDIA: POLITICS AFTER REVOLT OF 1857

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ABSTRACT

As a result of their own political and imperial objectives, the majority of British authors' writings about the Indian Revolt of 1857 were written with the goal of projecting their own racial superiority, as well as the heroism of their countrymen against the Indian Rebels. Four of the most notable military leaders provided outstanding leadership during the uprising. In India's academic environment, while the domestic side of the Indian Revolt of 1857 has been extensively explored and written about in recent years, few Indians are aware of the international dimension of this watershed historical moment in the country's history. The revolution not only sparked public and political debate in a number of nations, including the United States, Russia, Italy, and the Middle East, but it also inspired the people of those countries to fight against their colonial overlords. As part of the Indian Military History, it is necessary to examine the military perspective and leadership aspects of this historical event in greater depth and breadth. This paper illustrates the brief discussions of that time in a brief way.

Keywords: *Revolt, 1857, Rebels, leadership.*

INTRODUCTION

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a flurry of rebellions by native colonists against their oppressive rulers in various regions of the world, with the goal of achieving independence. While the British Empire was at its zenith and had the greatest geographic reach across the globe, other empires, such as the French, Spanish, and Dutch empires, were on their way out of existence.

An example of such a watershed conflict was the Indian Revolt of 1857 (also known as the Sepoy Mutiny), which not only shook the British Empire to its foundations but also elicited a massive response from people all across the world.

The word of this momentous occurrence spread all over the world, making it one of the earliest global media events in history. Despite the fact that the Indian Revolt of 1857 has

been mostly forgotten around the world, the records of the event may still be found in these countries' archives, books, poems, and novels, among other places.

There have been extensive investigations into the Uprising of 1857 by a large number of Indian, British, and other historians in terms of its domestic dimension. This includes the factors that led to the revolt as well as the actual conduct of multiple battles and other relevant historical issues. However, the international dimension of the Indian Revolt of 1857, which pertains to how the events of the revolt were covered in the world media, has not yet been thoroughly explored and written about in sufficient detail.

We have attempted to analyse the global response to this watershed point in Indian history in this essay. Imperialism and economic exploitation of Indians, as well as disruption of their social and religious structures, were hallmarks of the British rule over India from 1757 to 1857.

The British, believing that they had a complete understanding of the Indian mind and requirements, continued to exploit them for an excessive amount of time, which eventually led to the Indians rising up in revolt. A hundred years after the Battle of Plassey, the Indian Revolt of 1857 presented a very serious and realistic challenge to British power, with the potential to bring the British rule in India to an abrupt end.

Figure 1 Places of Revolt of 1857





The Indian Revolt of 1857

It has been given various names depending on the point of view and time period—Britishers preferred to refer to the events of 1857 as the "Sepoy Mutiny" or "The Great Mutiny" in an attempt to redefine the event as a "mutiny" of a few disgruntled sepoys rather than a massive uprising by people of all castes and classes that posed a serious threat to the Empire itself.

At the outset of the insurrection, the overall strength of the British East India Company forces stood at 1,41,361 soldiers, with the vast majority of them being native soldiers and the remaining 22,698 soldiers being Europeans in origin. The insurrection, which began at Meerut on May 10, 1857, and extended to Delhi on May 16, 1857, was the largest in Indian history. By the end of the first week, British authority in Northern India had almost completely crumbled and was no longer in control. With the participation of more than one lakh Indian soldiers, the majority of them were from the Bengal Army, and the backing of many more volunteers, the uprising gained momentum. 63 Indian Infantry Regiments of the Bengal Army had revolted out of a total of 74 Indian Infantry Regiments in the Bengal Army. Less than a month later, on 06 June 1857, the insurrection had expanded to Jhansi as well as Kanpur, which happened to be at around the same time as the revolt. In addition to Meerut and Jhansi, the insurrection was concentrated in Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, and Bareilly.

Additionally, the conflict took place in more than 30 locations across India, but with a lower level of intensity. Because of their involvement in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Second Opium War (1839-1842), the British were sluggish to respond at the outset (1856-1860). The British, on the other hand, were able to deploy greater forces and take on these concentrations of power in a more systematic manner because of centralized planning, the availability of resources from a wider geographical area, and a better intelligence network. Beginning with Delhi, which had the greatest number of revolted and where the British had the greatest stakes, the British bolstered their forces in India in an unprecedented manner during the years 1857-1858, breaking all previous records. After four months of violent warfare between the two sides, Delhi was re-captured by Company forces on September 14, 1857, after which it remained under Company control.

A day later, the British forces conquered Lucknow, which was the insurgents' second-most-powerful stronghold and which had been under their control since 1857. Despite the fact that



the British were able to put down the majority of the rebellion by July 1858, intermittent fighting continued until late in June 1859. The British suffered around 3000 casualties; however, the exact number of Indian casualties is still unknown at this time. According to one estimate, between 2 and 5 million Indians perished during the Revolt, out of a total population of 150 million, a figure that was significantly higher than the number of British losses. The vast majority of Indian victims were civilians who were indiscriminately slaughtered by the British, as opposed to a paltry total of approximately 1500 British civilians who were killed by the rebels in the same period.

Leadership

The contribution of four of the most renowned military leaders of the time—Nana Saheb, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Kunwar Singh—was a critical and significant component in the revolt's success. "Scorched-earth methods" were employed by Rani Lakshmi Bai (1828-1858) to combat the British during the Revolt of 1857, making her the tallest and most inspiring leader of the revolt. Before the Battle of Kalpi (in May 1858), she inspired her sepoys to take the pledge of 'fighting until death' in front of the entire army. She also inspired, trained, and led a large number of female fighters in her country. She was known as the Begum of Awadh and was born in 1820 in Awadh, India. She was a woman of tremendous drive and ability who rose up against the British in 1857 and was expelled from the country. After assuming control of the Awadh State, she organised a women's army and put up a valiant fight against the British. Her subsequent flight from India to Nepal took place on January 7, 1859, with the assistance of her confidantes. She was offered the opportunity to return to India by the British, but she turned it down and continued her fight for independence for another twenty years, until she was killed in the process. In addition to Kunwar Singh (1777-1858), who fought alongside the rebels in the Bihar region against the British army despite his advanced age, there were many more outstanding military leaders. Despite the fact that he lacked official military training, he exhibited great courage and determination, and he was instrumental in leading the mutiny of the three regiments of the Bengal Army in Dinapur. With his charisma and leadership abilities, he was able to rally a huge number of Indians to fight alongside him in Arrah's defence against the British.



Tactics Used by the Revolters

The Revolt was also notable for the large number of peasants who volunteered to join the rebel forces. Despite their lack of military training, these peasants fought heroically and sacrificed much. In the fight of Miaganj, 45 kilometres from Unnao, only roughly 1000 Indian rebel sepoys were present. Similarly, in Sultanpur, 20,000 peasants and 5,000 insurgent sepoys fought. The rebels also used 'guerilla tactics' in their war against the British East India Company forces, including avoiding direct contact with regular troops, intercepting communication lines, and cutting off supply assistance.

In the face of such grim prospects, these leaders sacrificed all for their treasured aim. In spite of its military failure, the Revolt tarnished the world's most powerful Empire's reputation and forever shattered the notion that the British Empire was untouchable. It led to the abolition of the East India Company and the establishment of direct rule by the British Crown. The "Act for the Better Government of India 1858" and other acts introduced numerous reforms, giving Indians more rights. It also restructured the sources of three British military Presidencies. The British stopped expanding their Indian holdings after that. Finally, the Revolt sowed the seeds of nationalist ambitions and created the first links of a single nationality, from which Indians of all religions, castes, and classes fought for freedom.

Global Responses to The Revolt

The revolt drew mixed responses from across the globe- some of which favored the Britishers while others favored Indians.

Response of British

The British account of the insurrection was influenced by political and imperial motives, as they did not want it to negatively impact neighbouring colonies. The purpose was also to project the British racial superiority as well as their attempts to educate and uplift Indian society from its primitive and traditional norms. British texts overstated the courage of their citizens against the revolters in India, which were subsequently transmitted throughout continents. Books like Lord Alfred Tennyson's *The Defence of Lucknow* and Christina Rossetti's *In the Round Tower at Jhansi 1857* lauded the British soldiers' valour.



The bravery of Ms. Ulrica Wheeler, daughter of Maj Gen Hugh Wheeler, Commander-in-Chief at Kanpur, was first reported in the British press in October 1857. Ms. Wheeler was said to have fiercely resisted the rebels until she died by jumping into the well. The legend of Ms. Wheeler became a symbol of the bravery and purity of British women who would rather die than be defiled by the revolt. After eight years, it became clear that the earlier known narrative of her bravery and death was untrue, as Ms. Wheeler had been saved by Ali Khan and was alive and living as a Muslim. The British literature also exaggerated the Indians' violence to sensationalize it, incite hostility among the British public, and justify retaliation against the Indians.

Indian Response

Following the 1857 revolution, no Indian dared to write about the rebels' cause for fear of reprisals after seeing the violent and mass executions of their fellow countrymen. Moreover, the British had jailed or executed numerous Urdu poets and reporters who supported the insurgents, further dissuading Indians from writing about their response.

Because few Indians were literate in the late 1800s, the rebels' perspective could not be recorded as the Britishers'. Moreover, printing resources in Hindi/native languages were scarce at the time. Out of fear and survival, many Hindi authors and scholars welcomed the British and offered inaccurate interpretations of 1857.

Despite this, the memories of those who fought the British remained alive in the form of folk songs, ballads, poems, etc., inspiring Indians decades later to formally record them. V D Savarkar wrote *The First War of Independence* in Marathi in 1908. Savarkar described the 1857-58 Indian Revolt as a national battle in which Hindus and Muslims united against a common foe.

Nationalist historians like R C Majumdar, S N Sen, and K K Datta also wrote on the event. After independence, more historians and academicians published books in Hindi and other regional languages. They called the uprising a turning point in India's struggle for independence.



European Responses

The 1857 events were extensively covered in the European press. Indian Revolt was presented in a variety of ways in the media in France and Germany. The main feature of the programme was that each European nation watched the news from India emphasizing what matched their history and beliefs. The imperialist nations saw the 1857 insurrection as a warning, although other European states like Hungary, Czech, and Bulgaria, yet seeking national identity, saw it differently.

German Response: The German press began covering the events in India in 1857 at the same time, as the general German audience was very interested in what was happening in India. German scholars' reactions were documented in several books, journals, and other writings. The two Berlin newspapers, Volks-Zeitung and Kreuz-Zeitung, both covered the insurrection extensively in 1857 and 1858. Margrit Pernau, for example, briefly mentioned the Indian Rebellion's impact on the British psyche. Claudia Reichel, a German historian, discusses the various perspectives of Theodor Fontane, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Edgar Bauer on the Indian Rebellion. Karl Marx pondered the future of India under British control.

Italian Response: In 1857, Italy was going through a tough patch on its way to independence. The Indian Revolt was largely covered in the British, Indo-British, and French newspapers. The three main political currents in Italy were conservative (Austrian-Hungarian Empire and other monarchs), democratic and moderate. The Revolt was used by the 'conservative' press to delegitimize British power and expansionism. It said the British had every incentive in downplaying the uprising's true scope and intensity. The attitude of the Italian 'democrats' stemmed from their view that the people should lead a national revolution to create a modern Italy. Thus, democracy backed the Indian insurgents.

French Response: The French, a competing colonial power, largely sided with India. The French press extensively covered the Indian Revolt, and French writers exploited it to justify an India free of British rule. The majority of French writers criticised the British reprisal. Even Le Siecle (The Age) decried the British atrocities. Similarly, another newspaper, L'



Estafette (The Courier), stated that if the British continued to persecute the Indians, France and other powers would have to intervene.

Spanish Response: In the nineteenth century, Spain considered England as a competing colonial power. However, the Spanish press justified the British dominance and reacted against the Indians. The Spanish journals argued that the British should have actively evangelized the Indians. The British Empire was advised to reign peacefully and to disseminate Christian moral principles and ideas. The Spanish authors' support for the British Empire stemmed from their concern that if the British power fell, the US may have a greater position in international politics.

Hungarian Response: The Hungarian revolutionaries had fought the Austrian Empire for over eight years before 1857, and had won their independence after two years of struggle. The Hungarian reaction to the 1857 Revolt reflected the mentality acquired following the failed 1848-49 Hungarian War of Independence against the Austrian Empire. They considered the revolution as a tragedy for both Indians and Hungarians. The 1857 Revolt was reported by four Hungarian publications: Budapesti Hirlap, Vasarnapi Ujsag, Budapesti Szemle, and Pesti Naplo (the most prominent Hungarian newspaper).

American Response: In 1857, the undersea telegraph cable did not connect America to Europe. So, on June 23, 1857, the Royal mail vessel 'Persia' arrived in New York harbour carrying news of the Meerut and Delhi rebellions. The initial report was in the New York Daily Times on July 6, 1857. The Indian Revolt and the American Civil War occurred three years apart on different sides of the globe. Prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865), the North's industrial and population growth outpaced the South's agricultural economy. The Indian Revolt was heavily covered in the American press, with a focus on its impact on the US North-South divide. While the New York Times defended the British's savage reaction, other reports focused on the economic consequences for America.

Russian Response: As Russia had been defeated by the British in the Crimean War in 1854, news of the Indian Revolt was received with considerable interest in Russia. In this context, stories of the Indian insurgents' victory over the armies of the British Empire during the early phases of the revolution brought great delight to the Russian people. Despite the fact that the Russian press had to rely on British and French sources to receive information from India, the



events of the revolution and the repercussions of the revolt were accurately reported and reflected in the Russian media. NA Dobrolyubov's work "An Opinion of the History and Contemporary State of the East India Company" (which was published in September 1857) argues that India's Indian Revolt of 1857 was "an episode of resistance that had been historically essential," rather than a purely coincidental occurrence. To Dobrolyubov, the British were not in India to civilise the Indian people, as was commonly believed at the time of their arrival. When it became clear that the Indian Revolt was more than a mutiny, but rather a popular movement supported by all sections of Indian society, the government press in Russia changed its attitude toward it. Russia was an independent nation pursuing the colonial policy of the Tsarist government in power at the time. The government publication, *Russkiy Vestnik*, regarded the revolution as a battle between 'barbarism' and 'civilization,' and expressed hope that the British would be able to put down the rebellion.

CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied that the conventional understanding and knowledge of a scholar warrior of the Indian Military about this key historical event is currently restricted to the perspective of the Revolt from within India. "The most effective way to kill people is to deny and eradicate their own understanding of their own history," remarked George Orwell in a well-known quote. Herein lies the fundamental relevance of the necessity to understand this Indian historical event in its totality, including the international component of 1857, which will aid in the enhancement of the existing perspective of a scholar warrior on the subject matter. The Revolt of 1857 was successful in 'denting' the prestige of the British to a significant degree, as well as dispelling the notion of British invincibility. A detailed mention of the Revolt was made not only in public and political debates in countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and Hungary, but it also sparked popular imagination, resulting in the publication of a large number of novels and other fictional accounts decades after the event took place. The subject is particularly significant because it served as an inspiration for people in other parts of the world who were confronted with a similar predicament to fight back against their colonial overlords. In order to understand this fight as a part of military history, Indian Army historians must get over their apprehension and dig further into it. The Revolt of 1857 should be included in promotion and competitive exams as well, in order to give it the recognition it deserves. It will also enable the Indian



population have a greater knowledge of the struggle and sacrifices made by Indians during the year 1857, which laid the groundwork for the subsequent nationalist struggle.

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