



Review of Revolution 1857

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Abstract: This research paper examines the 1857 revolution. On the afternoon of May 10, 1857, the sepoys in Meerut's cantonment revolted. The uprising spread quickly from the sepoy lines to the ordinary people of the town and surrounding villages. The sepoys took the bell of arms (where the arms and ammunition were stored) and then attacked and killed the white people, ransacking and burning their bungalows and property. The records office, jail, courthouse, post office, and treasury were all destroyed and looted. The Delhi telegraph line was severed. As night fell, a group of sepoys rode away towards Delhi.

Keywords: Revolution 1857, legitimacy, Hindus and Muslims, Bahadur Shah

Introduction: On May 11, the sepoys arrived at the LalQila's gates early in the morning. It was Ramzan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and prayer. Bahadur Shah, the old Mughal emperor, had just finished his prayers and meal when the fast began. He heard a commotion and noticed the sepoys gathered beneath his window. "We came from Meerut after killing all the Englishmen there because they asked us to bite bullets coated with cow and pig fat with our teeth," they explained. This has tainted Hindus' and Muslims' faith." Another group of sepoys had entered the city and began killing Europeans and plundering their property. They were soon joined by the city's ordinary residents. Some sepoys rode into the fort, completely disregarding court etiquette, and demanded that the emperor bless them. Surrounded by sepoys, Bahadur Shah had no choice but to give in to their demands. As a result, the rebellion could now be carried out in the name of the emperor. It had gained credibility.

Pattern of the revolution: North India was quiet for the next two days, May 12 and 13. When word spread that Delhi had fallen to the rebels and that Bahadur Shah had given his blessing to the rebellion, things moved quickly. Cantonment after cantonment in the Gangetic valley and west of Delhi raised the mutiny flag.

When the dates of the mutinies in the Gangetic plan are placed chronologically, it is clear that as news of the mutiny in one station spread to the next, the sepoys there mutinied as well. From Delhi,



there was a general movement eastward. Similarly, there is a pattern in the sequence of events in each cantonment before the bungalows. All records were destroyed; everything associated with the white man was targeted, including those perceived to be friends of the firangi (foreigner). Proclamations in Hindi, Urdu, and Persian were issued in the cities, urging Hindus and Muslims to fight and kill the British together.

Almost every station's sepoys began their actions with some kind of signal, such as the firing of the evening gun in some places or the sounding of the bugle in others. They took the bell of arms and plundered the treasury first. Their next targets were various government buildings, including the records room, jail, and telegraph office, and The targets of attack in cities like Lucknow, Kanpur, and Bareilly widened, especially after ordinary people joined the rebellion. Moneylenders and the wealthy were targeted and insulted. Peasants saw them as oppressors who were also British allies. What started out as a mutiny quickly evolved into 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 mention of planning and coordination immediately raises several questions, such as how the plans were made, who were the planners, and so on. The documentation available does not allow for direct answers to these questions. However, one incident provides insight into how mutinies might have been planned and organised. During the mutiny, Captain Hearsay of the Awadh Military Police was protected by his Indian subordinates. The 41st Native Infantry, which was stationed nearby, demanded that because they had killed their white officers, the Awadh Military Police do the same or hand over Hearsay as a prisoner.

The Military Police refused to do either, so it was decided that the matter would be decided by a



panchayat made up of native officers from each regiment. There is evidence that panchayats were held on a nightly basis in Kanpur's sepoy lines. As a result, there is a suggestion that decisions were made collectively. Given that the sepoys lived in lines and shared a common way of life, and that many of them belonged to the same caste, it is not impossible that they met to collectively decide their own future.

The question of leadership: Once British rule had "collapsed like a house of cards," as one British officer stationed in Lucknow put it, the rebels faced the difficult task of consolidating their unexpectedly quick success. They needed to decide what would take the place of British rule. This directly addressed the issue of leadership. The rebels almost always looked to those in power prior to the arrival of British rule for leadership. As previously stated, the sepoys of Meerut rushed to Delhi to obtain the Mughal Emperor's blessings and thus give legitimacy to their actions. Bahadur Shah's initial reaction was horror and rejection. Only after some sepoys surrounded him in the royal quarters of the Red Fort did he agree, realising he had no other choice.

Similar scenes, albeit on a smaller scale, were played out elsewhere. In Kanpur, the sepoys and citizens forced Nana Sahib, the successor of Peshwa Baji Rao II, to lead 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.

Kunwar Singh, a zamindar from Jagdishpur near Arrah in Bihar, was in the same boat. In Awadh, where the annexation and exile of the popular king, Wajid Ali Shah, were still fresh in the people's minds, the people of Lucknow celebrated the end of British rule by hailing Birjis Qadr, the dethroned king's young son, as their leader.

Rumours and prophecies: Kunwar Singh, a zamindar from Jagdishpur near Arrah in Bihar, was in the same boat. In Awadh, where the annexation and exile of the popular king, Wajid Ali Shah, were still fresh in the people's minds, the people of Lucknow celebrated the end of British rule by hailing Birjis Qadr, the dethroned king's young son, as their leader.

This rumour can be traced back to its source. Captain Wright, commandant of the Rifle Instruction Depot, reported that in the third week of January 1857, a low caste worker at the magazine in Dum Dum, near Calcutta, asked a Brahmin sepoy for a drink from his lota. The sepoy had refused, claiming that the touch of the lower caste would defile the lota. "You will soon lose your caste, as you will have to bite cartridges covered in cow and pig fat," he had been told.

It is impossible to know whether any of these rumours were true; some of the more extravagant



ones clearly were not. What is important to historians is that the people believed them. And people believed them because the rumours appealed to their fears and anxieties. The spread of rumours reflected the growing suspicion in the public's minds.

When viewed in the context of British policies beginning in the late 1820s, the spread of rumours and belief in them begin to make sense. Since then, the then-governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, has pursued a policy of reforming Indian society through the introduction of western education, ideas, and institutions.

English medium schools, colleges and universities were established to teach western sciences and the liberal arts. The British established laws to abolish customs likesati (1829) and to permit the remarriage of Hindu widows (1855).

The British annexed territories and principalities such as Awadh, Jhansi, and Satara, citing reasons such as misgovernment and refusal to recognise adoption. Following annexation, the British established their own administrative system, laws, and methods of land-revenue settlement and collection. All of this had a significant impact on the people of North India. All that the people held sacred and familiar - from kings to socio-religious customs to patterns of landholding and revenue payment - seemed to be swept away and 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.

Battle of Awadh provinces: 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 Resident was in charge of all practical administration. The Nawabs of Awadh retired to a life of leisure and extravagant consumption. Meanwhile, the British became increasingly interested in acquiring Awadh. They discovered that its soil was suitable for the cultivation of indigo and cotton. It was also conveniently located for use as a market. Furthermore, by the 1850s, all of the major territories had been conquered, including many Maratha lands, the Doab, Carnatic, Punjab, and Bengal. The acquisition of Awadh would complete the territorial annexation process and would



also aid Lord Dalhousie's project of expanding public works.

So, under the guise of misgovernment, Awadh was annexed in 1856, and its king, Wajid Ali Shah, was dethroned and exiled to Calcutta. The British annexation of India had caused discontent throughout the country, but nowhere more so than in Awadh. The British considered Wajid Ali Shah to be an unpopular ruler. They were completely wrong. Thousands of his subjects followed him to Kanpur after he left his beloved Lucknow, singing lament songs.

The immediate material losses matched the sense of emotional loss. 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. "The life has gone out of the body, and the body of this town has become lifeless," wrote one contemporary observer of Lucknow.

The battle for Delhi: The British realised that in order to regain control of India and restore the respect due to a ruling power, they needed to reconquer Delhi. This was not an easy task. In Delhi, Bahadur Shah's acceptance of the revolt's leadership provided structure to the uprising's organisation. The Emperor appointed his sons to army command and dispatched letters to the various rajas, instructing them to march to Delhi with their troops to join the King's army in an attempt to overthrow British rule. Provisions were provided for the sepoys, and measures were taken to prevent looting. However, tensions between the revolt's popular elements and its elite leadership were already visible. The soldiers frequently disregarded the Emperor's orders and addressed him in terms and tones never before used to address a Mughal Badshah. Tens of thousands of sepoys had entered and camped in Delhi since the end of May. The military and political goal was to attack and capture the Ridge, where the British garrison had sought refuge. Despite the fact that the sepoys had a numerical advantage, indiscipline and a lack of effective command made this a lengthy process. Bakht Khan's appearance from Barreily in late June appeared to change the situation. 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. Even as ghazis and mujahideen gathered in the city to fight and die for their faith, the mood in the Royal Palace was turning to despair. The indecisiveness of the insurgents in attacking the Ridge gave the British time to gather reinforcements and launch their attack on Delhi. The reinforcements arrived from Punjab, led by Brigadier John Nicholson.

Suppression of revolution of 1857: The British were taken aback by the revolt of 1857 and were



surprised by its initial success. It was difficult for them to put down the rebellion.

The British passed a series of laws to help them suppress the revolt before sending troops to reconquer North India. During May and June 1857, North India was placed under martial law through a series of Acts; military officers and even ordinary Britons were given the authority to try and punish Indians suspected of rebellion. As a result, the normal processes of law and trial were suspended, and it was made clear that rebellion would result in death.

The British administration began the task of quelling the rebellion armed with these laws and troops and other reinforcements brought in from Britain. The British, like the insurgents, recognised Delhi's symbolic value. A two-pronged attack was launched. One force moved from Calcutta into the Gangetic plain, while another moved from Punjab (which had remained mostly peaceful) to establish British authority in Delhi. The British launched an assault on rebel positions in Delhi in early June 1857, but the city was not taken until late September, after heavy fighting and losses on both sides. One reason for this was that rebels from all over North India had converged on Delhi to defend it.

Aims of revolution of 1857: Because of the scarcity of records and documents, it is difficult to determine what the rebels desired. The archives of the rebellion preserve the victors' points of view. Those who were defeated, the rebels, had their voices muffled. Furthermore, the majority of the rebels were sepoys and peasants who were illiterate and thus unable to record their version of events. Thus, we have a few proclamations issued by the rebel leadership in order to spread the message of the revolt and encourage people to join it. This section examines some of these proclamations.

Rejection of everything British: The proclamations attacked and condemned everything associated with the firangi's rule. All annexations were condemned, and the British were chastised for breaking treaties with the various principalities' rulers. The British were portrayed as untrustworthy. The proclamations bemoaned landowners' dispossession and the ruin of peasants and artisans. The British were chastised for every action they took. The British were regarded as global destroyers. The rebels wished to restore the world to its former splendor.

The proclamations emphasized the widespread belief that the British intended to destroy Hindu and Muslim religions and castes 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.



Conclusion:

- The revolt of 1857 began with a mutiny by soldiers in Meerut and spread throughout the entire Gangetic plain.
- Rumours played a major role in the spread of rebellion throughout the entire population in many of the areas affected by 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 contributed to general discontent in the region.
- The rebels' main goal was to overthrow British rule and restore the traditional ruling powers.
- 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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