



1857

ESSAYS FROM
ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY

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This volume marks the sesquicentennial of the events of 1857, in which multi-pronged, widespread and in many instances, organised resistance broke out against the British across north India. The contributions in this volume look at several aspects of 1857, and assess its events not merely in terms of their immediacy, but in the repercussions that they had politically, socially, and militarily. The essays look at how historiography has accorded its own interpretation to 1857 and its effects, an interpretation that is changing even today.

The collection has been grouped into five sections, each of which explores diverse aspects of 1857. The first section looks at historical perspectives and is titled "Then and Now"; the second, "Sepoys and Soldiers" looks at the military aspects; the third, "The Margins" is from the point of view of Dalits; the fourth, "Fictional Representations" studies how 1857 has been depicted in literature; and the fifth, "The Arts and 1857" looks at 1857 as it has inspired films, music and the art.

Held together with a preface by Sekhar Bandopadhyay, the essays in this volume—that range in theme and subject from historiography and military engagements to the dalit vanganas idealised in traditional songs and the “unconventional protagonists” in mutiny novels—converge on one common goal: to enrich the existing national debates on the 1857 Uprising.

Cover image: Plan of Battle of Cawnpore, by William MacKenzie, superimposed on the sketch, Cawnpore in 1857 (© Lisa Ripperton).

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Preface

ALL the essays in this volume, save one, were first published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* of May 12, 2007 in a special issue titled '1857'.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's introductory essay was specially written for this volume.

EPW is grateful to all the authors for their contributions and for permission to include the essays in this volume.

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Eighteen-Fifty-Seven and Its Many Histories

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

WHAT happened in the year 1857 in large parts of northern and central India has been given many names – some thought it was a “mutiny” of the sepoys of the British Indian Army; others believed it to be a “popular revolt” of the civilian population. William Dalrymple has recently used the term “Uprising”.¹ Eric Stokes, one of the foremost historians of 1857, has convincingly argued that it was not one movement but many;² so any one name possibly will not suffice. Yet, the names only signal the kind of meaning we intend to impute into this history. In the last 150 years almost every aspect of this history has been contested, re-imagined and re-invented for their presentist use. It is therefore one of the most written about episodes of Indian history. In 1998 Vipin Jain published an annotated bibliography on the “Indian mutiny” – as it is more popularly known in the international historical literature. He listed 1,172 printed books in European languages, 369 articles from journals and periodicals and 108 works of fiction.³ And that list is now already about nine years out of date, and we may add to that the ever growing number of books and articles written in Indian regional languages. In these years the debates on 1857 have progressed further and the present book is yet another contribution to that ongoing dialogue. However, what is important about this book is that the essays here do not represent any homogeneous view and therefore shed light on a variety of contested issues and epistemological positions. And the essays deal with not just what happened in 1857, but also with how those events have been remembered, reinvented, memorialised and put to presentist use.

What is interesting about the history of 1857 is that it has been claimed by both the history of the empire as well as by the

history of nationalism, and as Dipesh Chakrabarty mentions in this book, by the history of insurgency and popular protest as well. But none of these claims have gone uncontested or were ever considered as unproblematic. For example, the most immediate imperial interpretation of the revolt was that it was a Muslim conspiracy to restore the Mughal empire – an allegation which Syed Ahmed Khan countered almost immediately in a passionate pamphlet written in 1858.⁴ However, the more dominant imperial stereotype, as Peter Robb shows in his chapter in this book, was that it was primarily a mutiny of the sepoys, later joined by the unruly mob, taking advantage of the general breakdown of law and order. However, around the same time there were people like Benjamin Disraeli or Karl Marx who could see the element of “national revolt” in what was being commonly described as the “military mutiny”.⁵ Several years later in 1864 John Kaye wrote the official history of 1857, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-58*, and James Fitzjames Stephen, the conservative utilitarian ideologue of the empire, could immediately use it in defence of the empire. In what happened in India in that fateful year was for him evidence enough to show that no one in that country “had in him any power of improvement or any wish for it”.⁶ Hence they needed the enlightening touch of the Raj! In the writings of Charles Ball, John Kaye and George Trevelyan the history of 1857 became the history of its suppression, a history of the valour and courage of the English race and the glory of the empire.⁷ Recently, Tony Balantyne has shown that even in far-off New Zealand the indigenous Maori population were being told the stories of how the mutiny was suppressed in India, with a not so covert message about the futility of resistance to the empire and its possible consequences.⁸

On the other hand, it is popularly believed that Veer Savarkar by calling it the “First War of Indian Independence” inducted the history of 1857 into the narrative of nationalism. Jyotirmaya Sharma reminds us in a chapter in this book that the word “first” did not feature in the original title of Savarkar’s book – it was a later day interpolation. Whether it was “first” or at all “a war of independence” has been hotly contested in the last one and half century. On the 150th anniversary of the event the government of India has officially endorsed the term – “First

War of Independence"; but as the media reports suggest, that endorsement has not gone without contestation in the Indian Parliament.⁹ It will therefore be worthwhile to look at some of those contentious issues related to that romantic year and how does this book contribute to its many histories.

CAUSES

First of all, what happened in 1857 and why did it happen? It is now commonly believed that first was the mutiny of the sepoys in the Bengal army and it was caused by the greased cartridge for the newly introduced Enfield rifles that replaced the older Brown Bess muskets. Rumours spread quickly that the cartridge was greased with cow and pig fat, which neatly fitted into a long circulating conspiracy theory that the colonial authorities were out to destroy the religion of all Indians and convert them into Christianity. So Mangal Pandey in Barrackpore first raised the banner of protest on March 29 by refusing to use the cartridge and firing at his European officers. He was apprehended, court marshalled and hanged in April and he thus became in the nationalist legends the first martyr patriot of the Indian mutiny, his sacrifice recently celebrated in a popular, but controversial film, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, which Rochana Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty have examined in this book. Yet, we rarely appreciate what some recent researches have shown, that nothing happened so suddenly in March 1857, nor was the defiance of Mangal Pandey directly related to what happened since May in large parts of central and northern India.¹⁰

Indeed, it was for a long time that serious grievances were developing among the sepoys, as their privileges were gradually being curtailed and the expansion of the empire was putting on them extra burden of work, much of which went against their religious and caste susceptibilities. In November 1824 there was a fiercer mutiny in Barrackpore, when the sepoys refused to go to Burma, as crossing the 'kalapani', they feared, would compromise their caste status. The mutiny was suppressed with exemplary ruthlessness. But what historian Premansu Bandyopadhyay calls the "First Sepoy Mutiny"¹¹ remained unknown in imperial or nationalist histories because it was a mutiny with limited aims, and not directed at the destruction of

British rule. Similar discontent was simmering in the 1830s in the Bengal army, as Seema Alavi has shown, because the caste and religious privileges of the high caste sepoys were being gradually cut back in the empire's attempt to have greater control over the sepoys' lives and families.¹²

Kausik Roy tells us in his essay in this book that such acts of defiance were not always punished, as scope for limited dissent was built into the system. But what the sepoys in Meerut did on May 10 was not limited dissent and in that sense it was different from the individual defiance of Mangal Pandey. He was protesting against the infringement of his caste privilege and his individual sacrifice did not immediately lead to a collective revolt. "An accidental hero", as Rudrangshu Mukherjee has argued, Pandey came to represent all the rebels of 1857 more due to imperial construction.¹³ On the contrary, it was the sepoys in Meerut who took their defiance from limited dissent to the next step of collectively challenging British rule. They marched on to Delhi and on March 11 they compelled the ageing Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to accept their leadership. The mutiny thus had its other reluctant hero, who provided it with the much needed political legitimacy.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the Indians and the British officers in the army barracks in India were living in two different worlds, their lives were sequenced by two different concepts of time, with less and less communication and interaction between the two. The zeal of the Evangelical missionaries (who started coming to India after 1813) and some of the British officers began to create insurmountable barriers of distrust and hatred between the two communities – in the army, as well as in the larger society. As practically the whole of India was now under British control, power bred arrogance. In the British bureaucracy there was now a sense of contempt for anything Indian. As they were "absolute masters everywhere", wrote one of them in 1857, "restraint is cast away...and [they display] a supercilious arrogance and contempt of the people."¹⁴ Many Indians therefore legitimately believed that their religions and cultures were under threat and this explains numerous rumours that were going around in the army barracks that told of a conspiracy to destroy the religions of both the Hindus and the Muslims.

But apart from the rise of Evangelical Christianity and the growing arrogance of their officers, the sepoys were also distressed by other wider causes. A sizeable section of the sepoys in the Bengal army – about 75,000 of them – had been recruited from Awadh. The annexation of Awadh in 1856 and the summary settlement that followed finally broke the trust between the Company's government and the sepoys, who were once its trusted instruments of empire building.¹⁵ However, it needs to be pointed out that not all the sepoys in the British army joined the mutiny. The Bombay and the Madras armies did not join; in the Bengal army, as Kaushik Roy points out in his essay, about 1,00,000 either joined the mutiny or deserted, while 30,000 remained loyal. On the other hand, the Punjabi and Gurkha soldiers and the princely armies were used to suppress the rebellion.

Even more complex and differentiated was the civilian revolt that followed the mutiny of the sepoys. First of all, many regions – like Bengal, Punjab or entire south India – were not affected by what appeared to be a people's revolt in Awadh and North Western Provinces. In these regions the popular response was also differentiated as different groups of rural population were motivated by different sets of grievances. First, the princes were aggrieved because of Dalhousie's aggressive annexation policy. Thus Nana Sahib in Kanpur, Begum Hazrat Mahal in Awadh, Khan Bahadur Khan in Rohilkhand and Rani Lakshmibai in Jhansi became the legendary leaders of the popular rebellion. On the other hand, many other princes did not join and provided military assistance to the Company for the suppression of the rebellion. The other elements whose role is often considered crucial were the landed magnates or the over mighty 'taluqdars' of Awadh and North-Western Provinces, who joined the rebellion as many of them had lost their land, their forts, their status and prestige due to successive land revenue settlements of the previous era.¹⁶ But Eric Stokes¹⁷ has reminded us that not all of them had suffered, and some of them, the "new magnates", could indeed successfully manipulate the system and actually benefited from it and therefore exerted a moderating influence on their communities.

The crucial importance of the presence or absence of these feudal elements in the rebellion has been emphasised by a

number of historians, including Stokes and Judith Brown, who have argued about the “elitist” character of the rural revolt.¹⁸ This characterisation does not however take into account the fact that some of these old feudal elements – like Nana Sahib or Rani of Jhansi – were actually coerced into joining the rebellion – just as Bahadur Shah Zafar was forced into its leadership – by the sepoys, who needed their support to provide legitimacy to their movement.¹⁹ As for the Awadh taluqdars, Mukherjee has shown that often the peasants and the artisans forced their reluctant and vacillating taluqdars into action. Many of them still did not join the rebels, others surrendered when the British troops arrived.²⁰ In North-Western Provinces too, many taluqdars remained passively loyal, others tried to halt the tide of discontent.²¹ In other words, the decision to join the rebellion or to continue the rebellion was not always in the hands of the feudal leadership. There was a good deal of autonomous initiative on the part of the sepoys and the peasants. However, why the peasants joined the revolt remains another challenging question regarding the events of 1857.

Almost from the very beginning of colonial rule diverse sections of Indian peasantry in different regions actively resisted various changes brought in by the new regime in land revenue administration and property relations. These peasant movements were of varying intensity and scale, involving numbers ranging from “several thousand(s)” to “hundreds of thousands” of peasants. The most important and widespread conflagration of all was of course the revolt of 1857, affecting an estimated area of 5,00,000 square miles.²² The more conventional wisdom is that high revenue demands, the inroads of moneylenders into the rural economy and large-scale dispossession of taluqdars as well as small landholders in Awadh and the North-Western Provinces resulted in “taluqdar-peasant complementarity of interests”²³ and provided the motivation for the civilian revolt, which, according to S B Chaudhuri, represented “a common effort to recover what they had lost”. But once again Eric Stokes²⁴ has alerted us to the complexities of the situation. The relatively fertile and irrigated areas could withstand the pressures of high revenue demands, while moneylenders were least interested in dry and backward areas where the revolt was quite intense. So it is difficult to

draw a direct correlation between economic factors and the intensity of the revolt in various regions. It was more a sense of relative deprivation and the power of caste and community ties ('bhaiacharas') among various groups like the jats, rajputs, gujars or sayyids which became crucial factors in determining the intensity of the revolt. However, all the sections of the rural society were equally distressed by the aggressive preaching of the Christian missionaries and deeply distrustful of the social reform agenda of the colonial state. One could perhaps argue – tentatively – that the civilian population revolted for multiple reasons, but what united them was a common anxiety about their religion, which indeed defined their entire way of life.

NATURE

The nature of the mutiny of the sepoys and their relationship with the peasants is another contested issue of 1857. Rudrangshu Mukherjee argued in his book on Awadh that the sepoys were "peasants in uniform" and now in rebellion against the state they shed their uniforms and seamlessly merged with the peasants. Their activities, he argued in a later essay on the sepoy mutiny, had all the "features of peasant insurgency in the colonial period". It was "well planned", with clearly defined decision-making process through the panchayats; the targets were deliberately chosen to represent the property and person of their dominators. The mutinies "were informed by a consciousness of a project of power" and therefore very smoothly they transformed into popular insurgency, as an aggrieved peasantry was "waiting for the mutinies to initiate the uprising".²⁵ However, this position has been questioned by Sabyasachi Dasgupta in his present essay in this book. The peasants were no longer peasants in uniform, because uniform itself, he argues, had transformed the sepoys into a new aspiring power elite of Indian society. Years of Company service had empowered them and the mutiny was an opportunity to carve out for themselves an autonomous space within the existing power hierarchy of traditional India, vis-à-vis the feudal elites as well as the common peasantry. They were indeed terror to all sections of society. But nevertheless, their own organisation was democratic, and hence if they had succeeded there would have

been no going back to the old regimes and in this sense their revolt was progressive.

The imperial narratives of the late 19th and early 20th centuries made it quite explicit that in 1857-58 India witnessed a scale of violence unprecedented in the history of British India. And this violence was unparalleled because it was indiscriminate and was perpetrated on both sides – the colonisers and the colonised. However, how this violence is interpreted and emplotted in the subsequent retelling of 1857 constitute another interesting aspect of its contested history. The rebels wanted to destroy foreign/Christian rule, and whatever represented that oppressive regime became their targets of attack and these included sahibs, memsahibs, their children and their properties and whoever collaborated with them, like the local Christian converts and the Bengali babus – no one was spared. The worst recorded incidents were the Satichura Ghat massacre of June 27 and the Bibighur massacre of July 15 – both at Kanpur. The British counter-insurgency also unleashed extraordinary amount of violence, including public hanging of rebels without any trial, blowing them off from cannons, burning whole villages on slightest suspicion of complicity and women and children were not spared either.

In most of the colonial narratives of the events this counter-insurgency violence is condemned as mindless and as something that the history of the civilised British regime had never witnessed before, but it is at the same time explained as senseless retribution provoked by the beastly massacres of Kanpur. In the nationalist narratives on the other hand – for example in the writings of R C Majumdar and S N Sen – while the Kanpur massacre is condemned, it is also mentioned that it was in response to the reports of Brigadier-General James Neil's atrocities during his march from Allahabad to Kanpur, indiscriminately burning villages and hanging people.²⁶ It is interesting to note that in some of the recent retelling of the events, such as Saul David's *The Indian Mutiny 1857* – Neil's activities find place in the chapter 'The Backlash' that follows the chapter 'Satichura Ghat', which is explained in terms of Nana Sahib's infamous treachery, a theory which has been seriously questioned in many recent writings.²⁷ This emplotment gives a particular meaning to the sequence of violence by the colonisers

and the colonised – the colonial violence is rationalised as retribution for Kanpur, ignoring the fact that Kanpur itself was a retaliatory act to Neil’s atrocities! And David is not alone in explaining colonial violence as vengeance spurred by a sense of humiliation and injustice.²⁸

Rudrangshu Mukherjee has recently looked at the issue of violence in 1857. In his view, the rebel violence represented an act of “transgression” as they broke the colonial rule’s “meticulously constructed ...monopoly of violence”, which the colonised had experienced in their day-to-day lives over a century. What the rebels had done to the English civilians was actually replicating what had already been done to them by the British officers. The latter’s harsh retaliatory acts represented a basic intolerance of the fact that a subject population who had been taught to fear had the temerity to challenge their rule.²⁹ However, Kaushik Roy in his essay in the present book situates this violence in a transnational trajectory of the history of warfare. In his view the “limited war” concept of 18th century Europe, where liabilities were limited and soldiers were motivated by financial considerations, was in the 19th century giving way to a new concept of “people’s war”, where soldiers were citizens and they were motivated by ideologies and moral concerns. In this new warfare the lines between the combatants and the civilians were gradually elided. In his reckoning the East India Company’s territorial wars against the Indian princes in the 18th century were reminiscent of the European limited wars, while the “mutiny” that lasted from May 1857 to April 1859 signalled the coming of people’s war, where violence was perpetrated against civilians by both the British and the rebels. There was nothing “uniquely colonial” in this violence, he thinks, because violence had “an instrumental function” for both the colonial state and the rebel regime for inflicting moral blows on each other. In this war, while the rebels were inspired by their religion and were questioning the legitimacy of the foreign rule, the British were motivated by a “muscular Christianity and revenge”.

To the British sense of injustice and vengeance one may add another act of transgression, i e, the alleged “dishonour” to British womanhood. “What would India be without England? And what would the British Empire be without Englishwomen?”³⁰ The memsahibs in India represented national purity and the

alleged “dishonour” of women caused a national rage, both in India and in London. At Meerut, Delhi and Awadh, writes John Premble, “the blood of European women and children had been shed; and with its shedding warfare was suddenly loosed from its customary restraints”.³¹ Although later inquiries revealed that there was no rape, what was important however was the perceived sense of injustice that easily excited emotions. “The outbreak would not have been half so humiliating to the British”, wrote Jane Robinson, “had the women not been there...”³²

Those who really suffered from these untold miseries were the ordinary women and men, both Indian and English. So far as the Englishwomen and men were concerned, the diaries and memoirs of survivors began to appear in print from 1858-59 and kept appearing until the beginning of the 20th century, catering for the avid readers at home and in India. Their pain and suffering were remembered and their sacrifices provided an additional justification for the tightening of the iron fist of the empire. What was forgotten however, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in his essay in this book, was the suffering and pain of the ordinary Indians, who were at the receiving ends of the atrocities perpetrated on them by both the rebel sepoys and the advancing British troops. A recent admirable attempt to recapture their grief and misery is William Dalrymple’s *The Last Mughal* (2006) which for the first time gives a touching and sensitive account of what happened in Delhi between May 11, 1857 and its recapture by the British in September that year. The book has been criticised for drawing parallels with the post-9/11 “clash of civilisations” paradigm, which his own evidence clearly does not sustain. But the real significance of the book lies in the fact that it presents the events of 1857 as a human tragedy of epic proportions.

Dalrymple’s narrative is based on a set of documents, known as the “Mutiny papers”, which are the notes and letters of complaints written in Urdu and Persian by the ordinary residents of Delhi. On the basis of these, he has reconstructed a day-to-day account of the endless pain and miseries inflicted on the ordinary residents of Delhi, sandwiched between the two adversaries. The sepoys, when they descended on Delhi, indiscriminately killed the Europeans, including women and children.

Local Indian residents were not spared either, as their houses were raided and shops were looted by a desperate rebel army short of cash. Bahadur Shah Zafar, their poet emperor, watched helplessly. And then when the British army returned and took over the city, they too unleashed a reign of terror. Captured sepoys were just hanged – there was no time for trial. Other Delhi residents fled in fear; their houses were first looted and then razed to the ground. People were hanged indiscriminately on slightest suspicion of being sympathetic to the rebels. Villages were burned down when the British soldiers came looking for the rebels. And then there was the bizarre plan to demolish the whole city of Delhi as an ultimate act of retribution. By the time this was stopped, almost 80 per cent of the historic Red Fort had been destroyed.³³

In this violent upsurge was there really any role for an ideology, which Kaushik Roy alludes to? Peter Robb has revisited this issue in his essay in this book. The colonial theories ranged from a Muslim conspiracy to a Hindu revolt, to a reactionary movement of the old feudal elements. It was primarily a mutiny of a few misguided sepoys, which was taken advantage of by a corrupt dispossessed aristocracy, while the ignorant and innocent masses were duped into it. Kaye's works drew attention to Indian alienation from British rule, but that only provided an argument for improvement and better imperial governance. But nationalist certainly it was not. Hundred years after the event, Indian historians sought to write more objective histories of 1857. Among them, S N Sen and R C Majumdar, while trying to retrieve objective history from the colonial archives, ended up with observations which were strikingly similar to those of some of the colonial observers quoted by Robb in this book. It was a mutiny joined by the lawless elements; it was neither national nor a war of independence.³⁴ It was S B Chaudhury who indicated the possibility of a different interpretation, as he saw in the events of 1857 "a real, if remote approach to the freedom movement of India of a later age".³⁵

This nationalist view was not accepted by the majority of professional historians for a long time. By the 1960s, as Thomas Metcalf has argued, there was a greater consensus among historians that "it was something more than a sepoy mutiny, but

something less than a national revolt".³⁶ Eric Stokes further complicated it by indicating the existence of many and not just one revolt³⁷ and Chris Bayly argued that this Indian disunity actually played into the hands of the British.³⁸ These interpretations implying a plurality of interests at play were however not based on any analysis of ideology. Because it was widely believed that there was no well constructed ideology in 1857, as the rebels lacked a vision for the future. Metcalf wrote: "United in defeat, the rebel leaders would have fallen at each other's throats in victory".³⁹

However, from the 1990s there has been another remarkable shift in the historical interpretation of 1857. There is now a greater recognition that although there was no concept of a modern nation, the rebels' sense of space was certainly larger than their village or region. There was communication between the regions and in addition, what bound them together were freely floating rumours. What all the rebels shared was a rejection of the Company's rule, which they thought threatened their religion and caste that defined their entire existence. They fought for their 'deen' and 'dharam' and wanted to destroy anyone or anything that represented the British or the Christians, the latter often being euphemism for anything foreign. The rebels of 1857, according to this new interpretation, fought to restore a moral order that had been polluted by an obtrusive and overbearing foreign rule.⁴⁰ The rebels' actions, writes Gautam Bhadra, were determined by their "day-to-day experience of the authority of the alien state".⁴¹ They fought, as Ranajit Guha thinks, "to recover what they believed to have been their ancestral domains".⁴² Chris Bayly in a later book saw in the events of 1857 "a set of patriotic revolts", trying to restore the "Indo-Mughal patrias within the broader constellation of Mughal legitimacy".⁴³ This has been further developed by Rajat Ray. He emphasises the fact that in the revolt of 1857 the rebels constantly referred to the people of India as the "Hindus and Mussulmans of Hindustan". This was not modern nationalism, Ray agrees, but in it he sees the inchoate ideas of a confederate nation. In his own words: "It signified a confederation of two separate peoples bound together as one political unit by the shared perception of Hindustan as one land".⁴⁴

Swarupa Gupta further argues in her essay in this book that

this configuration of land and people and a sense of humiliation and disapprobation arising out of subjection to alien rule pervaded in latent or articulate forms in all classes and regions of India in 1857 – including even the Bengali intelligentsia. This is an interesting revision of the earlier ideas about the position of the Bengali middle classes vis-a-vis the revolt of 1857 – a position that was shared by historians on both sides of the ideological spectrum. For example, a leftist Benoy Ghose saw among these people only “unequivocal condemnation of the rebels of 1857” – a condemnation that emanated from “their own class-interest”.⁴⁵ Judith Brown at the other end also saw “loyalty” among these educated Bengalis because of their “material interests” and “a deep, ideological commitment” to the new order.⁴⁶ A close reading of the Bengali newspapers and periodicals of this period however suggests that condemnation was never unequivocal, but rather full of emotional dilemmas, and if there was expression of loyalty, it was coming more from the head than from the heart.⁴⁷ And this spirit of 1857 – which broadly meant a disapproval and defiance of British rule – would indeed take myriad forms. As Shashank Sinha shows in his essay, in the backwaters of the empire like the adivasi regions of Chhotanagpur, this spirit of defiance could be seen in the sudden surge in witch hunt. The adivasis could never accept the British ban on the practice that was so deeply embedded in their social consciousness and notions of cosmology; so, as the administration loosened in the wake of the mutiny of the sepoys, they tried to reclaim their rights. Sinha would regard this as a part of a long tradition of adivasi anti-colonial resistance movements in the Chhotanagpur region. This recent historiography thus indeed signify a remarkable shift in our understanding and representation of 1857.

AFTERMATH

The most direct aftermath of the revolt of 1857, as Bernard Cohn has argued, was the resolution of the ambiguities surrounding the issue of sovereignty in India.⁴⁸ The last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar who still theoretically held sovereign power in India until 1857 was tried for “treason”, found guilty and sent off to exile in Rangoon, where he died in 1862 at the age of 87.⁴⁹ In India the rule of the East India Company

was ended by the Act for the Better Government of India passed in the parliament on August 2, 1858, declaring queen Victoria the new sovereign power in India. However, apart from that symbolic termination of the legal fiction of Mughal sovereignty, the events of 1857 had other lasting imprints on British imagination and British policies towards India and the Indians. Almost a year of bloody warfare made the Indians suspect in the eyes of the British, the mutiny being the ultimate act of breach of trust. If Kanpur represented an unpardonable act of betrayal on the part of Indians – “so foul an act of treachery the world had never seen” – such other acts of British bravery as the resistance to the siege of Residency in Lucknow stood as evidence of British tenacity and heroism and proved that they were the chosen few to rule the empire.⁵⁰

This resulted in racial exclusivism both in Britain and in India. Michael Fisher in his essay in this book has shown how a more tolerant British attitude to Indians living in London suddenly came to be replaced by hostility provoked by racial and gendered stereotyping of Indian men, continually buttressed by stories and rumours about atrocities in 1857. The British womanhood now became the most authentic symbol of British purity which had to be protected from such reviled men. In India too, as Jane Robinson showed in her book *Angels of Albion* (1996), the trust between the memsahibs and their Indian household staff was now forever gone.⁵¹ A whole genre of “mutiny novels”, studied recently by Gautam Chakravarty,⁵² tried to reforge a British “imperial-national identity” that was based on the notion of racial and cultural superiority over the subject races. These novels became the site for demonstrating not only heroic imperial adventures, but also the impossibility of assimilating the subject people. Two essays in this book offer a re-reading of these stereotypes in the mutiny novels. Aishwarya Lakshmi sees in these novels a representation of India as a feminised domestic space tied in an uneven power relationship to her masculine colonial masters. Indrani Sen on the other hand examines how Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi has been portrayed in these novels, despite some notable exceptions, within the familiar colonial racial and gender stereotypes. What these novels sought to achieve, in other words, was to instil in British imagination the idea of not only military

supremacy but also moral superiority of the British over their Indian subjects.

A major consequence of this imperial mythography of 1857 was a significant shift in British policies towards India. The earlier reformist ideology of self-confident Victorian liberalism was now replaced by what Thomas Metcalf has described as the “conservative brand of liberalism”.⁵³ As the Indians were incapable of being reformed, they were to be governed according to their own tradition. This meant privileging and reinstating the old feudal elements – the princes and the taluqdars – who were now incorporated into an elaborate imperial hierarchy, at the top of which stood the viceroy. This also meant that the empire became more authoritarian. Indian tradition was redefined and objectified by a group of colonial ethnographers and this colonial knowledge represented an Indian society that was based on an unchanging system of beliefs, implying a society that was permanently divided along caste and religious fault-lines.⁵⁴

One of the results of this was erosion of the earlier respect for indigenous ideas and vernacular literary traditions and learning in favour of blatant Anglicisation. Anu Kumar in her essay in this book revisits this issue by examining colonial educational policies before and after 1857. What she shows is that the earlier liberal experiments of achieving a balance between vernacular and English education through such institutions as the Delhi College or experiments such as Allan Octavian Hume’s education policies in North Western Provinces were now jettisoned in favour of Anglicisation, western science and vocational training. This meant a gradual decline of Persian and Arabic language and literature. The final demise of the Delhi court culture and the Mughal aristocracy after 1857, as Jon Barlow and Lakshmi Subramanian have drawn our attention to in their essay, also meant the disappearance of state patronage for the traditional Hindustani classical music, which was now compelled to invent a new identity in the colonial cities, with the patronage of a new modern elite. Similarly, as Lata Singh points out in her essay, the artistic courtesan culture of Lucknow and north India rapidly declined in the wake of 1857 due to colonial regulations and the absence of patronage, and degenerated into prostitution. What all these changes implied was a conservative shift in post-1857 colonial policies. The empire became more autocratic, as

Indian sensitivities and traditions were overlooked and Indian aspirations for sharing power were denied. This also therefore made the empire more vulnerable as this frustration led to more articulate nationalist agitation for self-government.

The events of 1857 also therefore stand as an important landmark in the evolution of Indian nationhood. In 1857 it was primarily religion which defined the identities of the two peoples – the Hindus and the Muslims – and it was their religious fervour and passion which provided motivation for their actions. Such religiously informed sense of community had no place in the later day modern secular concept of nation nurtured by Nehru or Congress. However, Indian nationalism was never a monolithic structure and it is interesting to note how various strands of nationalism across the political spectrum, each looking for myths and heroes, tried to appropriate the history of 1857. It was of course Veer Savarkar who first inducted this history into the narratives of Indian nationalism by describing it as a “War of Independence” fought for ‘swadharma’ (one’s own religion) and ‘swaraj’ (self-rule). In this book Jyotirmaya Sharma has offered an interesting re-reading of this text. Savarkar believed in the intrinsic connection between swadharma and swaraj and once this connection was established he found no problem in justifying the indiscriminate violence as acts of retribution to avenge the past injustices perpetrated on the nation. At the other end of the spectrum, even more secular nationalists found in 1857 their heroes as well as symbols of colonial injustice. When Subhas Chandra Bose organised his Indian National Army, the women’s regiment was called the Rani of Jhansi regiment. On their march to Imphal in 1944, at Bahadur Shah Zafar’s tomb in Rangoon the soldiers of the INA took their solemn oath to free their motherland. “The road to Delhi is the road to freedom. On to Delhi!” – thundered their leader Netaji, hoping to rectify the historic injustice of 1857.⁵⁵ A little more than a year later in November 1945 the INA trials in Red Fort in Delhi invoked once again the memories of 1857 and the outrageous trial of Bahadur Shah in 1858. This national sense of injustice resulted in an emotional outburst of anti-colonial riots all over India.⁵⁶

Since then the history of 1857 has been incorporated into the grand narrative of Indian nationalism, as evident in the recent

endorsement of the term “First War of Independence” by Parliament. A more interesting story of its appropriation is however the presentist use of this history by the dalit communities in contemporary India. Unable to reject directly the dominant discourse of nationalism, they too have to seek a place within this grand narrative of the nation – although the major hallmark of their movement in the mid-20th century was contestation of this hegemonic construction of nation. Hence, in their search for nationalist heroines and heroes, as Charu Gupta and Badri Narayan show in their essays in this book, they find a convenient site in the fuzzy and contested history of 1857. Not constrained by a restrictive colonial archive, they freely invent, imagine and reconstruct from local oral traditions their own heroines and heroes – their Jhalkari Bai and Matadin Bhangi – who not only secure for them a place in the grand narrative of the nation, but also implicitly subvert that narrative by revealing the cowardice and vulnerability of some of the celebrated higher caste personalities of 1857.

The stories of dalit ‘viranganas’ also rupture the gendered elitist narratives of 1857 that ignored the roles of ordinary women. Lata Singh’s essay touches on another aspect of this neglected history by drawing our attention to the role of courtesans in 1857. The courtesans of Lucknow and Kanpur – often hidden, but mentioned nevertheless in historical documents – participated in the popular uprising not out of any personal interests, but in pursuance of a political consciousness that naturally allied them with the rebels against the colonial state. Such narratives – like the one on Azizun Nisa, recently reconstructed in a popular play – disrupts, as Singh argues, the familiar nationalist trope of “mother India”, i e, of respectable women alone sacrificing their lives in the service of the motherland.

What is interesting however is that these stories now seem to have received wider currency and legitimacy and have found place in popular films like *Mangal Pandey*, which Rochona Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty have studied in this book. The story of Matadin Bhangi – the untouchable worker at the cartridge factory at Barrackpore who reportedly warned Mangal Pandey about the contaminated cartridge – finds resonance in the sub-plot of Nainsukh in the film. It is his intervention which

makes Mangal conscious not only of the polluting substance in the cartridge, but also of the real meaning of untouchability in a wider context of colonial power relations, and it is he who becomes the major instigator of civilian revolt after Mangal's hanging. There is also a reference in the film to a courtesan "kotha" and a fictional allusion to one such courtesan falling in love with Mangal and marrying him the night before his execution. And when the civil disturbances start, she is seen in male attire participating in the rebellion – reminding us of what Azizun Nisa reportedly did in Kanpur. This provides further evidence that historical films, as Robert Rosenstone has argued, are "reflections of the social and political concerns of the era in which they are made".⁵⁷ It is not unexpected that in an age of globalisation the focus of public attention in India would once again be on nationalism and internal divisions in Indian society that need to be resolved in the greater interest of integration and national pride. Dalit narratives and other potentially disruptive tropes are thus appropriated in the popular nationalist retelling of 1857.

Majumdar and Chakrabarty have referred to the controversies about the historical accuracy of this film. What we need to remember however is that films like *Mangal Pandey* present – to use Rosenstone's terminology again – "history as drama" as distinct from "history as document". For the sake of dramatisation there are certain trade offs in terms of data and accuracy. "Film offers us history as the story of a closed, completed, and simple past". It refers to a broad system of values; it is more certaintist, as there are no grey areas; it is part imagined, but not totally fictional. It offers an idealised past for rectifying certain perceived imperfections of the present, in the hope of building a desirable future. The major advantage of film is that it is "capable of dealing with the past and holding a large audience".⁵⁸ Majumdar and Chakrabarty therefore argue that films like *Mangal Pandey* can bridge that hiatus between elite conception and mass consumption of history and thus contribute towards the development of a democratic culture and politics in India. We may add that such films also contribute towards building a national consciousness at a time when the invocation of an imagined inclusive past is essential to overcome the tensions of a fractured present.

The revolt of 1857 has thus many histories – reconstructed, re-imagined, reinvented, remembered and memorialised in various ages for their manifold presentist uses. There cannot be any one authentic version of these events – their causes, their nature and their aftermath remain for ever contested. The present collection of essays draws attention to some of those contested issues and contributes further to those ongoing debates.

NOTES

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- 8 Tony Ballantyne, 'Teaching Maori about Asia: Print Culture and Community Identity in 19th Century New Zealand' in H Johnson and B Moloughney (eds), *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2006, pp 22-23.
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- 15 See S B Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies*, The World Press, Calcutta 1957, p 14; T Khaldun, 'The Great Rebellion' in P C Joshi (ed), *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium*, K P Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1986, pp 1-70.
- 16 For Awadh, see Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984; for North-Western Provinces, see T R Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the 19th Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1979.
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- 18 See Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj*, p 185; Judith Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, Second edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p 92.
- 19 Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres*, Viking, New Delhi, 1998, pp 62-63; Tapti Roy, 'Visions of the Rebels: A Study of 1857 in Bundelkhand', *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1), 1993, p 210.
- 20 Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt*, p 157. For a similar view, see John Premble, *The Raj, the Indian Mutiny and the Kingdom of Oudh, 1801-1859*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1977, pp 191-92.
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- 22 Kathleen Gough, 'Indian Peasant Uprisings' in A R Desai (ed), *Peasant Struggles in India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1979, p 86.
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- 28 Similar emplotment can be seen in Andrew Ward, *Our Bones are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacres and the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, Henry Holt and Co, New York, 1996; Michael Edwardes, *Red Year: The Indian Rebellion of 1857*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1973; Edwardes however acknowledges that Neil's atrocities could not be justified by Kanpur as they predated Kanpur massacre; see p 85.
- 29 Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence*, pp 23, 32 and passim.
- 30 Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India*, London, 1909, p 7, quoted in Jane Robinson, *Angels of Albion: Women of the Indian Mutiny*, Viking, London, 1996, p 248.
- 31 Premble, *The Raj, the Indian Mutiny*, p 176.
- 32 Robinson, *Angels of Albion*, pp 116-24, 130-31; quotation from p 248.
- 33 See Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, particularly chapters 5, 6, pp 8-11.
- 34 See their views in S N Sen, *Eighteen-Fifty-Seven*, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi,

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- 39 Metcalf, *The Aftermath*, p 61.
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- 44 Rajat K Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003, pp 537-45.
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- 46 Judith Brown, *Modern India*, p 90.
- 47 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'From Subjects to Citizens: Reactions to Colonial Rule and the Changing Political Culture of Calcutta in Mid-19th Century' in M Lee and M Wilding (eds), *History, Literature and Society: Essays in Honour of S N Mukherjee*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1997.
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- 57 Robert A Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1995, p 48.
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OVERVIEW

Historians and Historiography

Situating 1857

Biswamoy Pati

THE “Sepoy Mutiny” (from hereon the mutiny) – as seen by imperialist officials and writers initially – not only challenged colonialism, but also forced it to devise ways of reorienting itself to face a future shrouded with uncertainties and challenges.¹ Those who focused on the “mutiny” theme projected it as the work of a set of discontented ‘sipahis’ who were unhappy with the introduction, in 1857, of the new Enfield rifle, with its distinct ammunition, which required the bullet to be bitten before loading. Rumours that the grease used on the bullets was either from the fat of cattle or pigs had serious implications. Thus, whereas cows were considered “sacred” by the Hindus, the Muslims considered pigs to be “polluting”. This created strong animosities and was located as an attack on Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs.²

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

Contemporary official thinking was deeply affected by the idea of the Rebellion (hereon the rebellion) being located as a “Muslim conspiracy”. Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) wrote a tract to counter this allegation, wherein he sought to examine the features that determined the nature of 1857.³ Of course, contemporary writings generated political hysteria and racism. Some “eye-witness” accounts in fact inscribed inventions such as the rape of white women during the mutiny⁴ that reinforced the image of the “barbaric Indian”.

Contemporary newspapers in England were condemnatory towards 1857. Nevertheless, there was a section of English opinion that supported the 1857 movement (to indicate the

wider notions of the events of 1857 that went beyond a mutiny or a rebellion and hereafter, the 1857 movement). One can refer to Chartists such as Ernest Jones who hailed the rebellion.⁵ The most serious dissenting voice was that of Karl Marx who linked the colonial exploitation of India to the anger that was displayed by the people during 1857.⁶ Moreover, both Marx and Engels hailed the unity displayed by the Hindus and Muslims who opposed British colonialism during the rebellion.⁷

By the end of the 19th century, the rebellion attracted and inspired the first generation of the Indian nationalists. In fact, with the development of Indian nationalism, 1857 and the events that occurred as part of the rebellion were soon incorporated and appropriated as a part of nationalist imagery. Thus, V D Savarkar, who was perhaps the first Indian nationalist to write about 1857 in 1909, called it the "Indian War of Independence". His pro-nationalist stance made Savarkar look with contempt and reject the British assertion that attributed the "war" to the greased cartridges. As he put it, if this had been the issue it would be difficult to explain how it could attract Nana Sahib, the Mughal Emperor in Delhi, the rani of Jhansi and Khan Bahadur Khan to join in. Besides, Savarkar harped on the fact that the 1857 movement continued even after the British governor general issued a proclamation to withdraw the offending greased cartridges. Savarkar went ahead and connected the rebellion to the "atrocities" committed by the British.⁸ This factor of unity about 1857 – that it cut across religious boundaries – makes Savarkar's argument particularly striking, especially since it goes against the subsequent shift in his position that made him see the Hindu-Muslim divide as the most important component in Indian history.

With the development of the working class movement in India, efforts were made to analyse 1857 from a Marxist position by M N Roy and Rajni Palme Dutt. Roy was dismissive about 1857 and saw in its failure the shattering of the last vestiges of feudal power. He was emphatic about the "revolution of 1857" being a struggle between the worn-out feudal system and the newly introduced commercial capitalism, that sought to achieve political supremacy over the former.⁹ Palme Dutt also saw 1857 as a major peasant revolt, even though it was led by the decaying

feudal forces, fighting to get back their privileges and turn back the tide of foreign domination.¹⁰ Consequently, one witnesses the beginnings of a process that interrogated and critiqued the internal feudal order, even while being appreciative of the popular basis of the rebellion.

The access to sources after independence saw interesting developments relating to the debate about the nature of 1857. What developed was a rather sophisticated nationalist historiography that emphasised the complexities of the 1857 movement. It included nationalist historians like R C Majumdar, S B Chaudhuri, S N Sen, and K K Datta, who were not uniformly comfortable with the idea that 1857 was the “First War of Indian Independence”. At the same time one needs to note that S N Sen’s work was sponsored by the state. Consequently, his authoritative “official” postcolonial account of 1857 obviously had a clear agenda – of celebrating Indian nationalism. In fact, the spirit of the Indian national movement influenced these historians. This meant that some of them referred to ideas like nationalism that were supposedly witnessed during the rebellion or saw the very inception of the national movement in the 1857 movement. Nevertheless, they went beyond the simple categorisations that had seen two dominant and opposing narratives – one that lauded the British as the victors who had “won” the war and on the other, the claims of the “rebellious Indians”, who had been “defeated”.

This meant a shift in focus, with efforts being made to locate the internal contradictions (viz, the Indian “rich”, which included the moneylenders and ‘buniyas’) and the popular basis of 1857 and not concentrate merely on the influential classes that hitherto had been the focus of contemporary British officials, or statesmen like Benjamin Disraeli. It is here that nationalist historiography worked on and developed the legacy of the Marxists, even as some nationalist historians inscribed their disapproval of seeing it as the “First War of Independence”. Further, the nationalist historians accorded a space – howsoever limited – to the popular basis of the 1857 movement.¹¹ They highlighted the “mutiny” component of 1857 that shifted and soon assumed the nature of a “civil rebellion”. Consequently, nationalist historiography most certainly opened up new possibilities.

NATIONALISM AND 1857

With the passage of time the development of other historical approaches generated a lot of debate on 1857 among historians. The first exhaustive work on the rebellion was published in 1957 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the event. Edited by P C Joshi, it focused on both the diversities and the specificities of the 1857 movement.¹² This included assessing 1857 against the colonial backdrop, examining aspects of participation and focusing on its internal contradictions. This volume also sought to highlight dimensions of popular culture by incorporating folk poems that have survived.

In many ways, this work inspired a serious spell of writings on the rebellion. Scholars examined the background that conditioned 1857.¹³ Here one can refer to Eric Stokes who wrote two books that focused on the revolt. His research and the sources used by him made him shift some of his earlier positions.¹⁴ He began by articulating the elitist nature of the revolt since it had been led by dominant castes and communities, and attributed the 1857 to caste mobilisation.¹⁵ Stokes developed his arguments in his next work where he did away with his initial idea that had provided centrality to caste. Consequently, this work went beyond caste and took into account inter and intra-regional variations while examining the nature of 1857. Interestingly, Stokes went beyond strictly economic explanations and wove in factors like ecology, culture and mentalities. This implied that Stokes shifted his focus to the common people and moved towards forms of popular protest seen during the the 1857 movement. In fact, the very title of this book marked a shift in the way Stokes located 1857 as a peasant revolt.¹⁶

However, it was left to historians such as Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Tapti Roy who took up specific area studies that brought to light fascinating complexities of popular militancy that had remained ignored thus far.¹⁷ It was Rudrangshu Mukherjee who pioneered the attempt to uncover the dimension of popular peasant protest.¹⁸ He examined the linkages between the talukdars and the peasants. While doing this, he focused on the leadership of the talukdars in the Awadh region and emphasised that the real strength of the talukdars' resistance and the 1857 movement was based on the general support of the peasantry and the people in the countryside. He explained this

by referring to the agrarian relations in the region, which was marked by an inter-dependence of the talukdars and the peasants. He also referred to the wide scale peasant base of the revolt in the region.

In his effort to explore the popular basis of the movement, where the people of Awadh fought the British, Mukherjee mentioned the number of ordinary and common weapons that were recovered, including firearms from ordinary peasants. On the basis of these sources he contested the dominant picture provided by "mutiny" literature about the nature of "magnate leadership". As Mukherjee put it, the peasants did not play a mere rear-guard, subaltern role. In fact, the peasants were on the side of the rebellion in areas where the talukdars remained loyal to the British. This perhaps illustrates that the rebellion was not always elitist in character and that in Awadh it had a mass, popular base.

Mukherjee stressed the participation and initiatives of the peasantry in the rebellion which had a clear sipahi component. As explained, the sipahis were peasants in uniform. Trying to explain the motives of the peasants that created the basis of popular protest, Mukherjee mentioned the removal of the talukdars in the new system of agrarian settlements imposed by the British and the problems posed by the new revenue demands, which caused insecurities and anxieties. These were reinforced by the removal of the nawab (Wajid Ali Shah) and the range of fears about religion and caste, together with the imposition of British rule that created fears and anger among the entire agrarian population. It led to apprehensions about the collapse of the traditional order of inter-dependence between the ruler and the peasants and issues related to the moral economy of the peasant.

However, as clarified, the link with the talukdar did not impose a subordinate position for the peasants, who actually played a decisive influence on many occasions. In fact, whereas the talukdars could and did manage to get pardoned, the sipahis and the peasants who rebelled faced the certain risk of being "massacred" in case they surrendered. These features determined the nature of the 1857 rebellion in Awadh, where the opposition to the alien order of the British was universal and assumed the form of a peoples' resistance.

Tapti Roy explored the popular world of the countryside in the Bundelkhand region and its relationship with the 1857 rebellion.¹⁹ Thus, the rebellion began by targeting government officials, bankers and mahajans and the burning of official papers and the “plundering” of neighbouring towns. As emphasised, these symbolised some kind of a selective targeting and the driving out of all visible forms of British power with which the peasants had interacted. As argued, these reflected the more negative forms of political assertion which marked the most obvious and widespread form of rural ‘jacqueries’.²⁰ This perhaps accounted for the involvement of a large number of people, sometimes as many as three to four thousand men of different areas (viz, Johurpur, Bainda, Simree and Wasilpur) who had assembled at Tindwaree on June 11, 1857.

Roy located a shift after the initial phase of the rebellion in Bundelkhand. Thus, after the anger of the common people was directed against those associated with the colonial power, it moved against those they identified with the internal order of exploitation. This included the auction-purchasers, decree-holders, merchants and bankers. These were the people who were responsible for the disruption and the disorder that set in with the advent of colonialism that affected the common people.²¹ As mentioned, after taking over the urban centres the sipahis began their “attacks” on the affluent people. After they left, people from the countryside continued to be involved with this trend, on occasions along with the zamindars. Roy located this as a symbolic way of displaying power by challenging the contested order.

While mentioning the intensity of the counter-insurgency operations, Roy wove in the large-scale desertions of people from their villages in an attempt to explain the intensity of popular participation. Besides, she highlighted the way the zamindars and peasants set up their own zones and made some rebel leaders, including some from outside their areas, head them. She emphasised the unity between the peasants and the landed sections against the British who were seen as the common enemy and some sections associated with colonialism. In fact, as suggested, an analysis of the enquiries that were conducted post-rebellion to punish the “offenders” can establish, among other things, the level of mass participation. She

illustrated this aspect by highlighting the participation of the low castes and the marginal people. Roy explained the high level of solidarity and mass participation by referring to the marginality of agricultural production in the Bundelkhand region which actually worked as a leveller among the different sections in the village. This posed acute problems and united the peasants and the landlords who faced impoverishment. It was this factor that united diverse sections in the countryside and both shaped and expressed rural dissent.

MULTIPLE NARRATIVES OF 1857

Over the years historians have also examined other facets of 1857. These relate to the organisation,²² middle level leadership,²³ activities in the areas where British authority had been subverted and if it was indeed a restorative rebellion.²⁴ More recently – since the 1990s – historians have focused on the popular dimensions of 1857, including the specificities of the involvement of adivasis,²⁵ low castes and outcastes,²⁶ popular culture²⁷ and questions related to the alternative order that emerged.²⁸ Moreover, scholars working within the paradigms of cultural studies have sought to delineate the way racism emerged as a virtual fall-out of the rebellion. By weaving in the theme of the “rape” of white women during the rebellion, they have focused on the barbaric image of the natives in south Asia.²⁹

Of course, Rajat Ray’s new work explores the popular mentalities of the 1857 rebellion and offers fascinating clues to grasp both its spirit and its collective cosmology.³⁰ As emphasised, the sipahis providing the crucial link between town and country, from where they were recruited. In areas like Bengal and Punjab they failed to ignite the country and the rebellion did not go beyond the cantonments. Race was an integral component of 1857. As pointed out, the rebellion led to sudden reversals in power relations, with the dominated race rising against the white, colonial regime. This was located in terms of Hindus and Muslims jointly asserting their respective religious creeds and not in terms of a nation asserting its independence from colonial rule. This was based in patriotism that was rooted in a spontaneous desire for independence from alien rule. Ray connected this to the people selecting and setting up their kings in some of

the storm-centres of the rebellion. This assumed significance in a context wherein the restored chiefs had to accept the position of the sipahi councils which epitomised peoples' power.

Ray described the alternative order that emerged as one that was curiously republican-democratic and which co-existed with a hierarchical, princely structure. After all, as has been pointed out, the restored feudal chiefships of 1857 were very unlike the old regimes of the 18th century since 1857 had a mass movement behind it. In terms of collective mentality, 1857 marked a "race war" against the white oppressors, who formed the master race. Nevertheless, ideologically this was projected as a struggle between the true religions (viz, Hinduism and Islam) and the false one (viz, Christianity). This did not result due to the efforts to impose the false doctrine of the "trinity". Instead, it was related to the question of identity of the "Hindus and Muslims of Hindustan" which was threatened by the moral and material aggrandisement of the arrogant imperial power. These features provided the dynamism that gave a new meaning to the reinstated chiefs of the 18th century.

Ray underlined the peculiarity of 1857. Thus, it was a war of races, without being a race war, since the subject race conceived it as a war of religion. It was a religious war that really cannot be located in this way, since the rebellion was not directed at the religion of the master race, but its political domination. It was a patriotic war of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, which he called the "inchoate social nationality" of Hindustan, but was not a national war. Conceptually, it was rooted in the past, but groped for an alternative to the technologically advanced British rule. In this sense it was not traditional, but was neither modern. The people involved in the 1857 rebellion located it as a "war of the Hindoostanis" to protect their 'dharma' and 'deen' and to "save the country". As explained, it did not form a part of the national movement nor can it be seen as the dying "throes of the old order".

As argued by Ray, the 1857 movement was a patriotic war of the people who expressed their sense of national identity through the brotherhood of the two principal religions of a common land. Ideologically it reflected a foetal national community that was opposed to the civil society, which had outposts in the enclaves of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Factors of

racial subjugation created a sense of oneness that was, however, untainted by ideas of national sovereignty. The 1857 rebellion could express itself only through the political vocabulary of restoration that the people were accustomed to. It was marked by a disjunction from the past in the way people's power expressed itself through the sipahi councils. Consequently, even while the rebellion failed to generate a new order it was unrecognisable to the prevailing tradition itself. The white man – and not the rebellion – had turned the world upside down. What was attempted during the rebellion was to turn the world back. However, as articulated by Ray, since the old order had been transformed it could never be restored.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen, the 1857 rebellion was the first anti-colonial mass movement directed against the aggression of imperialist policies demonstrated in course of the first-half of the 19th century. It was the first major armed movement faced by the British in India. It was a political struggle and not based only on what can be narrowly defined as "economic" factors. Besides shaking the foundations of colonial rule in large parts of northern India, its political fall-out was felt elsewhere, in the sense that it stirred up anti-colonial imagination.

Some nationalist historians like S B Chaudhuri argue that 1857 had two distinct strands – the military rising and the mass rebellion.³¹ The problem is that this position does not view historical processes holistically. In fact, it would be difficult to sustain it, if the background of 1857, that is, the popular movements seen against colonialism, is kept in mind. Besides, it needs to be stressed that the sipahi provided the crucial link between these two components, given his close proximity both to the peasantry and the countryside. This issue can be resolved in a serious manner in case more research is directed towards local studies that explore popular participation and protest.

A point that needs some elaboration is the emphasis given to the religious angle and the so-called "clash of cultures" during the rebellion. Strangely enough, echoes of this are heard even today that un-historically connect 1857 – where we encounter references

to terms such as ‘jehad’, ‘jehadis’, etc – to September 11, 2001 (more popularly called 9/11).³² It is perhaps here that one needs to examine the role of the Wahabis, who have been located mono-dimensionally as opponents of the British.³³ In fact, in a recent unpublished paper Iqtidar Alam Khan has shown that many of the people clubbed together as Wahabis included Sufis. Secondly, he has demonstrated the complexities involved in the interactions between the Wahabis and the British over the first-half of the 19th century, which oscillated between collaboration and confrontation and was not based on opposition alone. Finally, Khan shows how the meaning of jihad – viz, “religious war” – has been misunderstood, since in the context of the rebellion it meant a “just war” against imperialism, which included non-Muslims.³⁴

Talking of popular participation, historians like Ranajit Guha argue that peasants remained confined to their local boundaries.³⁵ As discussed, Tapti Roy’s work contradicts this assertion. As demonstrated by her, the peasants not only moved to urban centres but also welcomed rebels from outside their immediate areas as their leaders. This feature is also applicable to the adivasi tracts and, in fact, K S Singh has referred to the unity of the tribals and non-tribals.

We have seen how the basic thrust of the 1857 movement was directed against the colonial regime and the sections that emerged after its entry into northern India. Thus, it was not only against the planters and colonial officials, but also the buniyas and moneylenders who represented the internal order of exploitation. Moreover, one needs to bear in mind the world of the adivasis that had a history of major movements prior to 1857. Besides, there is a need to unveil the problems related to the ill-treatment and sexual exploitation of adivasi women, which seem to have links with some of these rebellions.³⁶ Similarly, the over-emphasis on sipahis like Mangal Pandey veils the role of the outcastes and low castes in the cantonments as well as outside.

Very recently a spell of research has been undertaken to focus on hitherto untouched dimensions under the aegis of the Indian History Congress.³⁷ For example, it has been shown that the colonial remained terrified of the Mughals – even after Bahadur Shah Zafar who was exiled to Rangoon – till as late as the 1880s. As a result, the colonial government feared that their

continued presence in north India would serve in delegitimising colonial rule and lead to the rise of anti-colonial sentiments.³⁸ Scholars have also tapped Urdu newspapers that tell us about 1857.³⁹ Similarly, historians have worked on “mutiny narratives” of white women to weave in the way the event was located by the white women.⁴⁰ Taken together, all these efforts would enable us to bring to light some relatively unknown facets of the 1857 rebellion.

SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue on 1857 presents to the reader the diverse concerns among historians, social scientists and those associated with cultural studies. The first four articles deal with areas such as the perceptions of the Rebellion; its impact on British society; its influence on aspects of British policy in India as well as its location by the early nationalists, who were charged with Hindu nationalism. Thus, Peter Robb’s ‘A Brief History of an Idea: On the Indian Rebellion of 1857’, focuses on the characterisation of the revolt in an effort to highlight the impact of the rebellion on perceptions and terminology. He situates the rebellion against a broad canvas. This includes a wave of revolts from Europe in 1848 to the Taiping and the Nien movements (both in China) after 1858 in the ex-colonial world, pointing to their failure as a common element. As Robb argues, the Indian uprising mattered greatly because British rule was restored, but would have mattered much more if the British had been thrown out of India. Robb’s contribution emphasises the way 1857 had an impact on the mind more than on the “material world”, and in this sense directs our attention to an area that is normally ignored.

Michael H Fisher’s ‘The Multiple Meanings of 1857 for Indians in Britain’, points to the diversities as well as the shifts associated with 1857 that had an influence on the way in which Indians within British society related themselves to 1857. At the same time, Fischer notes certain specificites that involved shifts and changes in the attitudes of British women towards Indians over the 1850s, during the rebellion and after it ended.

Anu Kumar’s ‘New Lamps for Old: Colonial Experiments with Vernacular Education, pre and post 1857’, focuses on the

vital subject of colonial educational policy. Kumar delineates some of the issues and experiments associated with the colonial educational interventions prior to 1857. As elaborated, the imprints of 1857 left their mark on this sector, which was decisively affected by it.

Jyotirmaya Sharma's, 'History as Revenge and Retaliation: Re-reading Savarkar's *The War of Independence of 1857*', while analysing Savarkar's position on the Rebellion, highlights the importance of looking at the range of his writings and his world view holistically. For Savarkar the most important aspect involved having an "enemy". In this sense, his work is charged with aggressive Hindu nationalism. As Sharma puts it, the celebratory descriptions of the massacres of the British in India introduced a new vocabulary into Indian politics. In fact, we can perhaps add that in many ways it outlined Savarkar's position about the "future" fate of the Muslims, clearly "otherised" by him.

The next three contributions take up issues related to the aspects of technology and war, including the "sepoy" component, during 1857. Kaushik Roy's '1857: The Beginning of People's War in India', examines aspects related to warfare. According to Roy, this underwent a shift from the "limited war" of the 18th century to what he calls a "people's war" by the mid-19th century. The European wars of the 18th century were of limited liability and fought without any moral or ideological issues. European warfare in the 18th century comprised conflicts between the armies raised, equipped and fed by bureaucratised monarchies. While waging warfare, such armies made clear distinctions between the armed forces and the civilians. However, Roy argues these "were wiped away" in the era of the people's war from the mid-19th century. Conducted by the people's armies, citizens became soldiers and the home front was also mobilised to support the war effort. Consequently, the watertight compartmentalisation between the home front and the battlefield "vanished". Public opinion was an important component that shaped the conduct of such wars. As Roy feels, the 1857 rebellion contained in it the elements that can be characteristic of a "people's war". The English East India Company's (hereafter EEIC) wars with the indigenous powers between 1770 and 1849 were similar to the European 18th century wars. Kaushik Roy sees a shift in the nature of the combat during

1857, with a lethal increase in the scope, intensity and impact on society, with both sides aiming to eliminate the enemy.

Sabyasachi Dasgupta's 'The Rebel Army in 1857: Vanguard of the War of Independence or a Tyranny of Arms', argues that the mutiny by the sepoys was an act of repudiation against the EEIC and also the traditional ruling class of India. It was an assertion of autonomous power, a force which threatened to sweep away the symbols of colonial power in northern India. It also threatened to alter the traditional power equations in indigenous society. The nature of the outbreak and the rapidly evolving political dynamics during the course of the mutiny represented a severe threat to established hierarchies in indigenous society. The sepoys sought to rapidly carve out an autonomous space for themselves within the power hierarchy. Dasgupta argues that the sepoy assertion was not synonymous with people's power. The autonomy of the sepoys did not represent the autonomy of the people. Despite their strong links with peasant society, the sepoys possessed a distinct identity and considered themselves to be distinct from indigenous society. Company service which they violently repudiated in 1857 gave them a sense of empowerment. In such a context, they aspired to be the new elite and were ready to take on the old elite and the common peasantry. Dasgupta's effort takes into account the Bengal sepoy. Though from high castes, they came from a middle farmer background and hardly belonged to the elite of indigenous society.

Then we have three contributions that direct our attention towards the fascinating possibilities that exist in the "margins" that are beginning to attract the attention of social historians negotiating 1857. Three essays take us into the world of the adivasi women, dalits and dalit women. Shashank S Sinha, 'In Search of Alternative Histories of 1857: Witch-hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chhotanagpur' (published in the 'Commentary' section of this issue), focuses on a predominantly tribal tract, outside the mainstream belt that was shaken by 1857. Sinha explores the gender angle that has hardly attracted any historian. His exploration draws upon women who were involved in the uprising more as victims than as active participants. Working on a canvas of social history he investigates the "occasioning of perhaps the first mass witch-hunts" among tribal

communities of Singhbhum and the Santhal parganas. As argued, these witch-hunts formed a conscious contour of resistance that reflect gender and also anti-colonial tensions in the Chhotanagpur tract.

Badri Narayan's 'Reactivating the Past: Dalits and Memories of 1857', explores a relatively new dimension by focusing on the way the dalit communities in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh relate to and identify with the 1857 movement. Their perceptions are reflected in the contemporary representation of their desires, aspirations and identity. As Narayan puts it, for these communities, the histories and heroes associated with 1857 is not merely an issue of academic interest but is also an intimate part of their everyday life in the form of memories of their heroes and deities they worship. Thus, they worship, pray and remember the freedom fighters of 1857 and are inspired by them in their daily struggle against continued social, economic and political exclusion and discrimination.

Charu Gupta's 'Dalit Virangas and the Re-invention of 1857', examines the representations of 1857 revolt in contemporary popular Hindi dalit literature of north India, focusing on the portrayal of dalit heroic women in it. This literature represents the historical consciousness of 1857 in the public memory of the dalits, with the focus no longer on the sepoys or the greased cartridges, but on dalits groaning under foreign oppression. These popular histories are littered with dalit female heroic icons – some constructed, some exaggerated, some discovered – who have become the symbols of bravery for particular dalit castes and ultimately for all dalits. Thus, they symbolise counter-histories of 1857.

Through these, Gupta interrogates both conventional and historical writings on 1857 and mainstream portrayals of dalit women and dalit writings on the subject. She examines ways in which contemporary popular Hindi dalit literature of north India has dealt with the role of dalits in the freedom struggles of the colonial period, particularly the revolt of 1857. Alongside, she focuses on the role and representation of dalit women in it. Gupta interrogates both conventional and historical writings on 1857 as well as mainstream portrayals of dalit women and dalit writings on the subject.

Finally we have a set of papers that look into the world of cultural representations. These range from examining "mutiny

novels" and the ideas about nationhood and the way 1857 had an impact on them to the efforts to negotiate the "destabilising" figure of the 'tawaif' (courtesan) and read the film *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* from a post-colonial position. Aishwarya Lakshmi's 'The Mutiny Novel: Creating the Domestic Body of the Empire', focuses on the virtual emergence of a literary genre – often referred to as the "mutiny novels" – as a fall-out of 1857. Mutiny novels began to create the empire as a domestic space. Lakshmi examines two mutiny novels, Meadows Taylor's *Seeta* (1872) and Flora A Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), to illustrate that this domestic body of the empire was gendered and deterministic. While noting the shifts and changes from the earlier period, she emphasises the re-alignment and re-reading of the late 19th century "adventure novel" within the post-mutiny domestic ideology and figuration of the empire.

Indrani Sen's 'Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi in Colonial 'Mutiny' Fiction' studies the construction of the Rani of Jhansi in four colonial novels written between the 1870s and 1900s, which touch upon the subject of the rani and the theme of the Rebellion of 1857. She probes the diversities of representations and the shifts in these fictional works, varying from licentious to heroic projections. As argued by Sen, the strategic importance of this literary genre and its enormous popularity can be traced to post-'Mutiny' insecurities and anxieties and the need to present epic narratives of British heroics and the solidarity of colonisers.

Swarupa Gupta's '1857 and Ideas about Nationhood in Bengal: Nuances and Themes', points to the uniqueness of the Bengali (regional) representation of an iconic "national" event. As emphasised, in the grounding of nationhood, the location of 1857 in history was crucial. Gupta argues that the urge for progress emphasised the inculcation of a "proper" code of conduct and self-improvement, which found expression in cultural nationalism and the agenda of 'jatipratishtha'. Thus the national element in the literati's discourse was couched in a 'samajik' and not a religious rhetoric. The utopic and inclusive space of the continually-incorporating 'samaj' moved beyond Hindustan toward a 'Bharatbarsha', transcending and marginalising the localised nature of the revolt. Though there were inherent limitations (such as contextual dilution of

the all-India Hindu-Muslim unity) in such conceptualisations, the discourse has left legacies for contemporary representations of 1857 as a symbol and well-spring of nationhood.

Lata Singh's 'Visibilising the 'Other' in History: Courtesans and 1857 Revolt' (also published in the 'Commentary' section of this issue) brings to life the performing community of courtesans. As she argues, they acquire in their ordinariness and everydayness a stereotypical image. Thus 'tawaif', the term used for the courtesan has value-loaded connotations and is often equated to a whore, marginalising these women performers into silence. When they did speak, they had to reinvent themselves through polite myths to reinforce their self-esteem. By negotiating the courtesan through a play *Azizun Nisa San Sattavan Ka Kissा* ('A courtesan and 1857 Revolt') written by the present-day playwright Tripurari Sharma, Singh touches upon a dimension that has been left untouched by social historians and feminist scholars. Sharma's play attempts to rewrite dominant versions of historical truth and relocate and establish the "loose" subjects of colonial history to their rightful roles in the anti-colonial struggles too. As Singh puts it, what makes the play particularly significant is not just retrieving the courtesans who were denied agency or a presence by the colonialist project of mis-representations, but also to bring them back into the creative domain. And Rochona Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty's paper, 'Mangal Pandey: Film and History', engages in a theoretical discussion weaving in reel life and history. It explores the diversities and pluralities associated with a post-colonial 'reading' of the film *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*.

NOTES

- 1 In fact, the taking over of India by the British Crown in 1858 symbolised this shift.
- 2 A classic example would be Charles Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny: Giving a Detailed Account of the Sepoy Insurrection in India; and a Concise History of the Great Military Events which have tended to Consolidate British Empire in Hindostan*, London: The London Printing and Publishing Co, 1858-59.
- 3 See Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2000.
- 4 Although these charges had been investigated after the collapse of 1857, nothing clear seems to have emerged to suggest that such occurrences did take place.

- 5 Ernest Jones, *The Revolt of Hindoostan; or, The New World*, Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, London, 1857.
- 6 As Marx put it: "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked. Did they not, in India, to borrow an expression of that great robber, Lord Clive himself, resort to atrocious extortion, when simple corruption could not keep pace with their rapacity? While they prated in Europe about the inviolable sanctity of the national debt, did they not confiscate in India the dividends of the rajahs, who had invested their private savings in the Company's own funds?...These are the men of 'Property, Order, Family, and Religion'." Karl Marx, *The New-York Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1853, in Marx and Engels, *The First War of Independence, 1857-1859*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 34, 1975.
- 7 For details see Marx and Engels, *The First War*.
- 8 An Indian Nationalist (V D Savarkar), *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, London, 1909.
- 9 M N Roy with the collaboration of Abani Mukherji, *India in Transition*, J B Target, Geneva, 1922, 1-2.
- 10 R P Dutt, *India Today*, Manisha, Calcutta 1970 (originally published by Victor Golancz, 1940), 195, 306.
- 11 R C Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1957; S B Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-59*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1957 and *Theories of the Indian Mutiny*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1965; S N Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, Publication Division, New Delhi, 1957; and, K K Datta, *Reflections on the Mutiny*.
- 12 P C Joshi ed, *1857: A Symposium*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1957.
- 13 C A Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, Amar Farooqui, 'From Baiza Bai to Lakshmi Bai: The Scindia State in the Early Nineteenth Century and the Roots of 1857', in Biswamoy Pati ed, *Issues in Modern Indian History: For Sumit Sarkar*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2000.
- 14 Eric Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Peasant Society and Agrarian Rebellion in Colonial India*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978; and his *The Peasant Armed: The India Revolt of 1857* (with an editorial note by C A Bayly), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.
- 15 Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj*.
- 16 Stokes, *The Peasant Armed*.
- 17 See for example, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984 and Tapti Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994.
- 18 Based on Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt*, 157-70.
- 19 Roy, *The Politics*, 218-47.
- 20 Jacquerie refers to popular peasant revolts in France; here Roy uses the term to indicate the popular basis of the peasant movements in the

- Bundelkhand region during the 1857 movement.
- 21 The auctioneers and decree holders refer to the people who had emerged as landholders through auctioning of land when the owners who held them failed to pay their taxes and the courts were involved in settling disputes by issuing decrees. The anger against the merchants was related to money-lending, with high interest rates.
- 22 Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'The Gwalior Contingent in 1857-58: A Study of the Organisation and Ideology of the Sepoy Rebels,' *Social Scientist*, 26: 1-4, January-April 1998 (hereafter *Social Scientist*), 53-75.
- 23 Gautam Bhadra, 'Four Rebels of Eighteen Fifty Seven' in Ranajit Guha, (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985, 229-75, he also discussed the Kol participation in the Rebellion; and Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri, 'Profile of a Saintly Rebel – Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah' in *Social Scientist*, 39-52.
- 24 Talmiz Khaldun, 'The Great Rebellion' in Joshi ed, 1857, 1-70 and E I Brodkin, 'The Struggle for Succession: Rebels and Loyalists in the Indian Mutiny of 1857' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 1972, 6, 3, 277-290.
- 25 K S Singh, 'The 'Tribals' and the 1857 Uprising', *Social Scientist*, 76-85; one can also cite Shashank Shekhar Sinha, 'Dynamics of 1857 in a Region: Chhotanagpur Revisited', proceedings of an Indian Council of Historical Research Conference on 'Historiography of 1857: Debates in the Past and the Present State of Knowledge', New Delhi, December 9-10, 2006 (unpublished; hereafter ICHR Proceedings).
- 26 One can cite here Badri Narayan, 'Dalits and Memories of 1857', ICHR Proceedings.
- 27 Badri Narayan, *Social Scientist*, 86-94.
- 28 The pioneer here was EI Brodkin, 'The Struggle for Succession: Rebels and Loyalists in the Indian Mutiny of 1857', *Modern Asian Studies*, 6, 3, 277-90, 1972; Iqbal Hussain, 'The Rebel Administration in Delhi' and Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'The Gwalior Contingent in 1857-58: A Study of the Organisation and Ideology of the Sepoy Rebels,' *Social Scientist*, 25-38 and 53-75, respectively, also focus on this dimension.
- 29 Here one can specifically refer to Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 and Nancy Paxton, *Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- 30 Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003; see chapter 4, 'The Mentality of the Mutiny: Conceptions of the Alternative Order in 1857', especially, 353-60.
- 31 See for example S B Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion*, 258-59.
- 32 One has in mind here bestsellers like William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, Viking, New Delhi, 2006, who harps on this theme.
- 33 K M Ashraf, 'Muslim Revivalists and the Revolt of 1857' in P C Joshi, ed, 1857, 71-118, locates the Wahabis in this manner.
- 34 Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'The Wahabis in 1857 Revolt: Brief Appraisal of their Role', ICHR Proceedings.

- 35 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, 308.
- 36 I have in mind here Shashank S Sinha, 'Dynamics of 1857 in a Region', ICHR proceedings, and his piece in this Special Issue of the *EPW* together throw new light on 1857 in terms of its interactions with the adivasi population.
- 37 In fact, the 67th Session of the Indian History Congress (Calicut, March 10-12) had a special session for two days on 'Indigenous Discourse of 1857'; hereafter IHC, Calicut.
- 38 Amar Farooqui, 'Sanitising Indigenous Memory: 1857 and Mughal Exile', IHC Calicut.
- 39 Shireen Moosvi, 'Rallying the Rebels: Exploring the Files of the *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*', IHC, Calicut.
- 40 Preeta Nilesh, 'Colonial Historiography Revisited: Perceptions of the Memsaib on the "Mutiny" of 1857', IHC, Calicut.

Remembering 1857

An Introductory Note

Dipesh Chakrabarty

THE 150th anniversary of 1857 is being celebrated in many parts of India. That is one kind of remembering of the historical rebellion. Anniversaries ring of calendars set to different scales, from the national and the regional to the personal. Calendars mean order, some ordering of national or personal time. There must be an element of unintended historical irony about the process by which popular rebellions or insurgencies – the quintessential politics of which is to challenge an oppressive order by collective gestures of defiance, a phenomenon that Ranajit Guha once called “negation” – become domesticated festive dates on a national calendar and cease to act, or so at least the makers of the calendar hope, as an incitement to further rebellion.¹ This short introductory essay is built around the tension between these two kinds of recall of the original event: as a recurring, ceremonial date in the life of the nation and as a perpetual incitement to future rebellion.

What is the politics of remembering 1857? To facilitate discussion, I shall begin by distinguishing between three kinds of practices involved in the work of memory. I do not claim that these three practices exhaust the complex phenomenon of memory. These are simply the practices that usually come under the purview of the social sciences, while there remain many other aspects to memory – such that scientists study – but social scientists are not trained to speak of them. The three functions I have in mind are (a) memorialising, (b) memorising, and (c) remembering/forgetting. Both memorialising and memorising have to do with representations of the past. The third function – that of remembering/forgetting – takes us beyond the politics

of representation. To speak in terms that thinkers such as Roman Jakobson or Roland Barthes once made available, it could be said that the relation between memorialising and memorising is somewhat akin to that between metaphor and metonymy, while the third function, remembering/forgetting, takes memory-work beyond that of representation. Let me begin by explaining my terms, one by one.²

I

MEMORY AND THE QUESTION OF FORGETTING 1857

There is one kind of memory of 1857 that is perhaps now irretrievably lost. This is the past as personal grief: memory that would have expressed itself at the time in numerous acts of personal grieving, in families' and kin-groups' sense of loss and bereavement, both on the British side and on the Indian. Think, for example, of the 250 rebels hanged or some blown to pieces at the mouth of guns near Peshawar by the orders of Colonel John Nicholson in May 1857 or the British prisoners put to death the following month in Jhansi by the rebels, details of which incidents are here reported in this special issue by Kaushik Roy. How much do we know about the history of the pain that their relatives would have suffered and about the expression and duration of such pain? Precious little. Not simply because we have no documents, though there is no denying that documents, if they had existed, would have helped us to produce accounts of such painful memory. The more important reason, it seems to me, why our memory-practices to do with deeply personal sense of loss challenge historical representation is because these practices speak often to a level existence that is better captured by phenomenological thinking than by the kind of paper-trail that the historian routinely chases.

The Italian author Alessandro Portelli's remarkable book, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, gives some examples that might help us to think through the problem.³ Portelli's book is a study (mostly) of the wives and children of 335 unarmed and innocent civilians who were mercilessly gunned down by Nazi occupation forces in Rome on March 24, 1944 in retaliation for a partisan attack on some Nazi personnel the day before. He gives several examples of expression of grief where the expression is built into

everyday practices, leaving no traces for the future historian. “We asked my grandmother”, says one of Portelli’s interviewees, “no questions about this story [to do with the interviewee’s uncle killed in the massacre], as we knew it was almost a taboo subject that you couldn’t touch. I remember that she had this golden brooch with my uncle’s picture, she always kept it pinned to her suit, so the pain of this story is something that was passed through to us, too.” Yet this transmission of pain was conditional on what was described here as “a great deal of restraint”.⁴ Or there was this case of another mother whose grief was expressed life-long through her physical orientation to the world at times of holidays:

Most of the time [she] tried to deny it, and so she thought he was abroad, she thought he was away. She knew, but she had developed this neurotic denial of death – my grandfather wrote about it in some poems – where on holidays she would set the table for him, and when the season changed she would bring out his winter or his summer clothes; so that this agony was revived for those who had come to terms with the problem of this death.⁵

Portelli’s material comes from interviews. But in either example, we are dealing with expressions of grief, culturally specific in their particularities no doubt, that would have left no evidence on paper. Coming back to 1857, who knows how the bereft grieved and for how long. This later forgetting of grief of the survivors of the event belongs to the memory function that challenges the very question of representation. Without representation at a primary level, there is no second or third-order representation that we usually call history.

If grief presents us thus with a lost object of representation, there exists, it would seem, a critical relation between this lost object and the object whose representation founds the nation. Take Rabindranath Tagore’s great novel *Gora*, serialised first in the Bengali magazine *Prabasi* between the years 1907 and 1909. The novel is set in Calcutta in the 1880s. Gora, the central character of the novel, is a child brought up by Hindu-Bengali foster-parents. In his 20s, he becomes a convert to the stridently Hindu nationalism that was sweeping across Bengal at the time. It is only towards the end of the novel, faced with a dying father who tells Gora that he has no right to perform ‘sradhha’ should

the father die, that he discovers suddenly his biological identity: he was not born a Hindu. He was born of Irish parents during the tumultuous events of 1857. Krishnadayal, his foster-father says to him: "It was during the Mutiny. We were in Etawa then. Your mother fled from the sipahis and sought refuge one night in our house. Your father was killed in the previous day's fighting. ...He was an Irishman. That very night your mother died after giving birth to you. Ever since then you have been brought up in our house."⁶ Krishnadayal offered to tell Gora the name of his biological father: "His name was –". Gora stopped him midway through the sentence: "His name is not necessary. I don't need to know his name."⁷

As is well known, it was on this deliberate refusal on Gora's part to know the lost object of his grief – on this void – that Tagore outlined the condition that made it possible for Gora to be both expansively and inclusively Indian. "Today", says Gora in the last chapter of the novel, "I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Khrishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my caste, whatever everybody eats is my food." And he continues in this vein: "I have taken birth this morning, with an utterly naked consciousness, in my own Bharatvarsha. ... Teach me the mantra of that deity who belongs to all – Hindu, Musalman, Khrishtan, Brahmo – the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person... – the deity not only of Hindus but of Bharatvarsha."⁸ It was as if only by making the grief of the Irish family (including his own) unavailable to any order of signs that Gora could bring his identity as Indian within the sphere of representation.

My conclusion, then, is: we have no memories of 1857. There were no doubt such memories once but they died without heirs. Andrew Ward tells the story of William Jonah Shepherd, a Kanpur survivor. His nerves were so "frayed" by the scene of his family's massacre that, much though he tried, he could not write down his "memories" for about 20 years, and when he did, he depended on other people's published papers for accuracy. His descendants barely remembered him. His letters were all lost. The family "would never name a child after him" for "Uncle Jonah had such bad luck".⁹ For the Indian rebels, there is not even this much detail about the complexities of familial grief and the process of remembering/forgetting that challenge, as I have

said, representation. Insofar as 1857 is concerned, all we have, it seems to me, is the politics of memorialising and memorising the event, that is to say, the politics, indeed, of representation, of metaphorical and metonymic use of the composite name “1857”.

THE METAPHORIC FUNCTION OF MEMORIALISING

Memorialising has to do with the creation of memorials, temporary or permanent. But memorials, as mere objects, cannot perform the function of memorialising. Memorialising happens when particular objects associated with someone or some event we want to remember, are put in a relationship to certain practices to create rituals of remembering. Such rituals are usually collective in nature. A good example is the modern story of Shivaji's memorial in Raigad, Maharashtra. Once erected in the memory of the king who gave the Mughals many sleepless nights, it had fallen into utter disrepair by the 19th century with a jungle growing up around it. It was a European writer, James Douglas, the author of *Book of Bombay* (1883), who first drew attention to its dilapidated condition and upbraided nationalists in Maharashtra for neglecting the memory of Chhatrapati Shivaji. It was then that Ranade, Tilak, and a host of others moved in the 1880s to petition the government to sanction money for its repair and later created special nationalists rituals around the ‘samadhi’.¹⁰ By itself, then, the samadhi performed no memorialising function. It was only through a combination of its own materiality and (nationalist) ritual activities associated with it that the samadhi resumed its status as a memorial.

1857, similarly has left many material traces, from the ruins of the Residency building in Lucknow, the Memorial Well at Kanpur, Felice Beato's photographs, William Simpson's watercolours, to archival documents that scholars have pored over to produce historical narratives of “the mutiny”. These relics can become memorials depending on what use we put them to. And, sometimes, they have indeed performed as memorials. As Narayani Gupta writes:

In the years after 1858, visitors to north India would reverently relive the episodes (of 1857) by pacing them out on the ground, aided by

detailed maps and copious albums of photographs. As the sites became pilgrim-destinations the concept of “monument” used for historic architecture widened to include sacred landscapes like the Ridge at Delhi and memorials to those who had died in 1857-58. Historic buildings like the Delhi fort were invested with new interest through their connection with the events of the revolt.¹¹

What is at issue is the critical role of practices in making memorialising possible. Photographs, maps, stories, coupled with the practice of travel or pilgrimage, could be part of a memorialising complex. Books or even films, as Rochona Majumdar and I have tried to suggest in our essay in this issue, can be grist to the mill of memorialising. Surely, the official history of 1857, *1857*, written by Surendranath Sen, was issued by the government of India to memorialise the momentous year. Publishing a book to mark the national calendar, creating a readership through journals, seminars and conferences, was indeed to memorialise.

The first step towards memorialising, it seems to me, is to create out of a set of events a second or higher-order representation. This is what I have called the metaphoric aspect of memorialising. Just as Jakobson defined “metaphor” as the “word for word” connection in language, one could say that to attempt to make the events of 1857 stand for a larger, coherent theme is to create a metaphor out of these events: i.e., to make these events represent something beyond their immediacy. This is where this present issue, at one level a memorialising enterprise marking the 150th anniversary of 1857, also takes a critical stance on anniversaries. For many of the essays collected here critically engage the metaphoric function that gives an anniversary its representational drive. Peter Robb questions many of the larger metaphors that have subtended scholarly and amateur interest in the subject: the “myth” of an “Indian revolt” and colonial arguments that made 1857 into a ground for debating “the nature of India and the way it should be ruled”. Sabyasachi Dasgupta similarly questions the tendency to look on 1857 as a “people’s revolt” though Kaushik Roy makes the events of rebellion an instance of the idea of “people’s war” that he sees as part of an emergent global history in the middle of the 19th century. Aishwarya Lakshmi and Swarupa Gupta both delineate and critique colonial and Bengali-nationalist attempts,

respectively, to render 1857 intelligible by producing out of it larger narratives about the feminised landscape of India (wanting to be colonised) or a space for “reconfiguring the nation”. Barlow and Subramaniam’s detailed discussion of the career of north Indian music and Anu Kumar’s essay on the Delhi College before and after 1857, both ask if 1857 was indeed the fulcrum around which turned the meta-narrative of transition to “modernisation” of music and education under British rule. Fisher’s essay brings into view a global aspect to the history of 1857 by focusing on Indians in Britain. Here, again, 1857 is both staged and queried as a turning-point in the larger narrative of race relations in the empire.

It is the conversion of an event into a metaphor of relevance to public life that makes for a degree of competition in the public sphere as to which event should be memorialised, that is to say, which event could act as the best bearer of a chosen metaphor. In democracies, such competition borrows from the available language of equal or proportional representation. In his aforementioned book, Portelli cites an interviewee who resented the attention that the monument at the Fosse Ardeatine received in the commemoration of the Nazi massacre of 1944. He has an interviewee called Nicoletta Leoni say:

It isn’t right that in Rome we should talk only of the Fosse Ardeatine. We should talk also of Forte Bravetta, we should talk of La Storta, we should talk of people killed in the streets. My grandfather had been sentenced to death, he might have died at Forte Bravetta; now, if he had died at Forte Bravetta, how would I feel when all that people talk about is the Ardeatine? But the media, if you tell them about Forte Bravetta, they don’t care. Do you know why the Ardeatine are so important? Because the monument is there.¹²

Echoing as it were the questions posed by Leoni, Sabyasachi Dasgupta asks in this issue, “Why do we celebrate the revolt (of 1857) as the first war of independence? Why should not we celebrate say the santhal and the Moplah uprisings or for that matter countless other uprisings? Why are their 150th anniversaries not commemorated?” The same contestatory spirit is documented in the contributions, say, of Charu Gupta, Badri Narayan, Shashank Sinha, and in Lata Singh’s essay on “Courtesans and the 1857 Revolt”. All of these essays ask versions of Nicoletta Leoni’s questions. They seek to represent the hitherto

under-represented in the histories and commemorations of 1857: the courtesan, the dalits and dalit women, the tribal peoples of overlooked regions. They document the demand – sometimes partially realised – for new commemorations and anniversaries, that is to say, for a new national calendar and new set of heroes: Matadin Bhangi, Jhalkariibai and others. Gupta and Narayan, by their use of ballads and songs, also point to a domain of popular, anti-elite history and alternative practices of celebrations and claims to the nation that challenge the official narrative of Indian nationalism. In both cases, what is fascinating is the absorption into the language of electoral politics in north India – by Mayawati, by the Bahujan Samaj Party and other agencies – of dalit heroes and the tales about their valour relating to the battles of 1857.

Memorialising, one may then say, has a public character and seizes upon a historical moment to produce metaphors for public life. It is, however, at the same time open to all the contestations of public life as well. And this collection of essays bears ample and rich testimony to this contestation.

MEMORISING 1857: THE METONYMIC FUNCTION

By “memorising”, I refer to acts of remembering that work through certain short-hand devices that could be, in a manner of speaking, compared to mnemonics. However, my use of the term “memorising”, which owes much to the classic studies of Frances Yates and Paul Ricoeur, is also different from theirs.¹³ So I need to explain a little. Readers of Ricoeur will find my juxtaposition of “memorising” and “remembering” in the first sentence of this paragraph strange because Ricoeur clearly sees the two terms, with good reason, as opposed in meaning. We remember things that have happened before. “The temporal mark of the before thus constitutes the distinctive mark of remembering”, writes Ricoeur.¹⁴ Memorising, something that Yates, drawing on her sources, calls “artificial memory,” relates to what we deliberately use as a learning strategy for mastering something unfamiliar (such as a foreign language).¹⁵

So why do I use “memorising” with respect to 1857? Why do I use “remembering” and “memorising” in the same sentence? It seems to me that 1857 produced much panic on the European

side (shared by many non-combatant Indians as well). Its counterpart on the side of the rebels would be fear, the fear that British revenge wanted to instil in them. It is hard to find a continuous account of what this panic, or its memory, did to the colonial officialdom in the years following 1857. We have some indirect pieces of evidence close to hand. Writing on the occasion of the centenary of 1857, the communist leader and writer P C Joshi recalled that when Keir Hardie came to India in 1907, "the year of the 50th anniversary of the 1857 uprising", Hardie noted "in what jitters the British administration were", Joshi also cited Edward Thompson who, in 1925, wrote of "the Mutiny" as an "unavenged and unappeased ghost" that flitted "right at the back of the mind of many an Indian ...as he talks with an Englishman".¹⁶ Thompson's statement may have had a measure of truth; but he was also probably looking into a mirror. Statements such as his and Hardie's point to a long after-life of the events of 1857 in the minds of the British in India.

At the same time, it is clear that for historians on the Left, too, irrespective of debates about whether or not 1857 was a "popular revolt", the rising has, for quite some time, meant a general figure of insurgency in the countryside that was to presage political developments in the 20th century. Max Harcourt, who in the 1970s studied peasant rebellions in Bihar and eastern UP during the Quit India (1942) movement, was struck by the similarity between the violent events of that movement and those of 1857. "The pattern of unrest", he writes, "was very reminiscent of the rural disturbances accompanying the 1857 Mutiny", the only difference being that the peasantry, disarmed after 1857, had no weapons to match those of the British.¹⁷ Ranajit Guha's classic book on peasant insurgency in 19th century India – that sought to distil out of 1857 and other risings a general paradigm for peasant insurgency in this period – saw the same logic of insurrection at work in the anti-vasectomy campaign of the mid-1970s in north India: "...one has merely to refer to some of the anti-'nasbandi' disturbances in rural Haryana and urban UP in 1976-77 to realise how little the transfer of power has done to diminish the force of the paradigm (of peasant insurgency) illustrated ... by 18th and 19th century events".¹⁸ The inspiration that Guha's words provided to his younger colleagues in *Subaltern Studies* seems to be at work even today. Why else

would the Forum for Democratic Initiatives in Delhi propose to hold a conference at the Gandhi Peace Foundation (ironies abound!) on March 20, 2007 on '1857 and the Legacy of Peasant Resistance' and give it the sub-title, 'Tebhaga, Telangana, Naxalbari and Now, Singur'?¹⁹ This, clearly, is an instance of not just celebrating a day on the national calendar but actually looking on 1857 as the precursor of many other rebellions to come.

Thus, whether on the colonialist's side or on that of the historian of the Left, 1857 came to be codified into a general form of insurrection. By this code, 1857 is simply an incitement to popular politics, a call to insurgency. I have used the word "memorising" to refer to this of silent process of codification, a deposition of memory that gets activated through triggers (a metonymic process or in Jakobson's terms, a word-to-word connection). This latter kind of recall of 1857 exceeds the logic of simple anniversary celebrations. Surely, if 1857 were still seen in official circles as a potent and possible form of popular unrest that could break out any time and on a large scale in the country, the government in Delhi would not be disbursing money to facilitate seminars and symposia celebrating the anniversary. These two different kinds of recall of 1857 – as incitement for popular politics and as a festive time on the national calendar – and the inherent tension between them is what I have wanted to address in this introductory essay. My point is that for good historical reasons, insurgencies have remained a potential form of popular politics in India just as riots on the streets have been a part of French democracy since the revolution. That is why the element of incitement cannot ever be completely domesticated or extinguished by the process that makes for a stable national calendar of political anniversaries of events such as 1857.

NOTES

1 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, Chapter on 'Negation'.

2 I am drawing mainly on two essays: Roland Barthes', 'Myth Today' in his *Mythologies*, translated Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, New York, 1984; first published in French, 1957, pp 109-59 and Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances' in his *Language in Literature*, eds, Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1987, pp 95-114.

- 3 Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003.
- 4 Portelli, *Order*, p 212.
- 5 Portelli, *Order*, p 213.
- 6 Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, translated by Sujit Mukherjee Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 2001, p 471.
- 7 Tagore, *Gora*, p 471.
- 8 Tagore, *Gora*, pp 475-76.
- 9 Andrew Ward, *Our Bodies Are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacre and the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1996, pp 542-44.
- 10 Sanjiv Desai (ed), *Maharashtra Archives Bulletin, Nos 13 and 14: The Shivaji Commemoration Movement*, Department of Archives, Bombay, 1983, pp iii-v.
- 11 Narayani Gupta, 'Pictorialising the 'Mutiny' of 1857' in Maria Antonella Pelizzari (ed), *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900*, Canadian Centre for Architecture and Yale Centre for British Art, Montreal and New Haven, 2003, p 225.
- 12 Portelli, *Order*, p 240.
- 13 See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974; Paul Ricoeur, 'The Uses of Artificial Memory: The Feats of Memorisation' in his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated Kathleen Blamey and David Pellaur, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, pp 58-68.
- 14 Ricoeur, *Memory*, p 58.
- 15 Yates, *Art*, Chapter 1: 'Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory'.
- 16 P C Joshi, '1857 in Our History' in P C Joshi (ed), *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1957, p 217.
- 17 Max Harcourt, 'Kisan Populism and Revolution in Rural India: The 1942 Disturbances in Bihar and East United Provinces' in D A Low (ed), *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004; first published in 1977, pp 318-20.
- 18 Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p 336.
- 19 I take the details of this event from a notice of the seminar received via a list-serve email.

THEN AND NOW

On the Rebellion of 1857

A Brief History of an Idea

Peter Robb

ERIC Stokes commented on the heat of reactions even in the late 20th century to the rebellion of 1857-58. He referred to the notorious scene of the massacre in Kanpur, the well down which victims were stuffed, and the site of a memorial from which Indians other than Christians were barred until independence. It was then replaced by a bronze effigy of Nana Sahib's general, Tatya Tope. This "singularly tasteless and vicious reprisal" was curious evidence of the power of symbols, according to Stokes. The memory of European dead was desecrated while more numerous Indian victims of British atrocities went without memorial. For both India and Pakistan, Stokes argued, the rebellion had become "the formative violence of their national history, the proof that colonialism had been withstood even unto blood".¹ Is this why the revolt is still so prominent in the popular imagination, in India today as it was in Britain in the later 19th century? I suggest that the key aspect is that it is regarded not just as a mutiny in the Indian army and an uprising in regions of India but as an Indian revolt against the British. "Indians rose against East India Company rule", according to one recent historian.² It is said without reflection. The rebellion was thus a crucial stage and expression of two nations in making. This essay is about the characterisation of the revolt.

Definitions matter. States are built from sentiment and loyalty as well as from self-interest and force. Of course technological and material changes are important to the creation of nations, but they act on the ways people see themselves and their ability to combine. Conditions and understanding are shaped by economic and political power, but the processes are complex.

Nations develop (as do labour relations and the mode of production) not only from the logic of capitalism but also because of resistance, protest and law, which are expressions of ideas and experience. Put another way, there is the power of capitalists or politicians or generals, but also the power of context, organisation and rhetoric. These are distinct forms that interact.³ To return to the subject of this paper: the great rebellion of 1857-58 was crucial largely because of its impact on perceptions and terminology. It was – another point from Stokes – one of a wave of revolts from Europe in 1848 to Taiping and Nien after 1858; but all they had in common was failure.⁴ The Indian uprising mattered greatly because British rule was restored but would have mattered much more if the British had been thrown out of India. Its material consequences were minor by comparison with its impact on the mind.⁵

I

In the 1890s H G Keene (of the Indian Civil Service, 1847-1882) wrote a history of India for students and colleges. It was produced by W H Allen and Co, “Publishers to the India Office”.⁶ It blamed the mutiny and revolt on over-ambitious changes introduced by Dalhousie, policies that challenged the “two main classes of the Natives” (Hindus and Muslims) who though not uncivilised were “at an earlier stage of human development” and thus found the “ideas and practices of Christendom ...unintelligible”. Hindus objected to attempts to curb the polygamy of “certain classes of Brahmins” and feared for the corruption by English ideas of young babus in Bengal. Muslims were alarmed at the deposing of the Nawab of Awadh, the threats to Delhi, and the loss of elite employment; they ignored the sage advice that under Islamic law they were neither required nor permitted to rebel against the British. (This infantilising of Indians and the listing of their “irrational” prejudices were hackneyed well before the rebellion.) Keene then acknowledged the multiplicity of more material motives in 1857. Soldiers objected to their conditions and especially to overseas campaigns. In Awadh, Henry Lawrence faced a combination of the high and low, offended by the annexation, injured in their property and privileges, or suffering hardship as a result of discharge from the army or

loss of trade after the demise of the court at Lucknow. But the verdict was that interference had been the problem, unlike in areas still ruled indirectly through their own chiefs. Keene then celebrated British military prowess, and the loyalty of the Sikhs. He cited some benefits of the victory such as an end to the Court of Directors, reorganisation of the army, the final expulsion of the Mughals. He offered both an historical analysis and a prospectus for successful British rule. It should be indirect as far as possible but firm and conducive to loyalty.

Keene did recognise the importance of sentiment. As well as the immediate loss of life, the interruption of business, and the financial burden, he considered there were major long-term costs from the “suspension of all good feeling between the European community and the Native population”.⁷ In the classic early histories Kaye too had drawn attention to a broad and deep alienation from British rule, while Malleson (apart from savagely attacking Canning’s “weakness”) advanced an elaborate conspiracy theory.⁸ Many contemporary officials blamed disaffected Muslims; and later that friend of Pakistan, Ian Stephen (among others) attributed a decline in Muslim fortunes to their consequent victimisation by the British.⁹ Saiyid Ahmad Khan made his initial reputation among the British by rebutting this supposed Islamic perfidy, while echoing those who blamed British incompetence. On the other hand, another contemporary official, Charles Metcalfe, thought Muslims too clumsy to plot whereas Hindus had a “genius for conspiracy”.¹⁰ Muslim responsibility had been assumed from their alleged violence and fanaticism while Hindus were thought passive and fatalistic. In time rather more officials came round to Metcalfe’s view as they faced Hindu protesters and revolutionaries, and sought to make allies of the Muslims. Even in the 1920s, Al Carthill (the pseudonym of B C Kennedy, ICS) was convinced there had been a Hindu revolt in 1857, fomented out of the brahmanical supremacy that had arisen among the Marathas and that later would inspire those Hindu nationalists who reacted against western rule and knowledge. By Carthill-Kennedy’s account, the rebellion was an early part of “a secular war with the west” that would eventually grip both Hindus and Muslims.¹¹

Whatever the butt of the accusations, in such colonial histories we find the familiar tropes of contented and ignorant dupes led astray by cynics or fanatics, and of secret combinations among opponents unknown to the British. They were not devised in 1857, and are arguably inherent in the attitudes of all governments. But certainly the many accounts of mutiny and revolt gave them credence and publicity. Elements were repeated many times in a wide range of different situations during colonial rule. They were applied, we may note, particularly to religions as units of political analysis and fitted neatly with stereotypes about Indian religiosity.

Other colonial writers were concerned to minimise or explain away disaffection among Indians. These conclusions too had their roots in current policy and attitudes. Rice Holmes thought he "ought to reserve his detailed narrative for events of historical importance". The choices he made are plain to see. His much re-printed book, first published in 1883, was called in full *A History of the Indian Mutiny and of the disturbances which accompanied it among the civil population*.¹² The title says it all. Holmes concluded that the mutiny could have been prevented by better treatment of the army, better discipline, and a higher proportion of European troops. But once the army had rebelled "no power on earth could have prevented quasi-rebellious disturbances". Just as the "lawless and tyrannical barons" of twelfth-century England took advantage of King Stephen's weakness and later chafed against the strong and just Henry Plantagenet, or as London "thieves and roughs" would foment a "violent outburst of crime" if the police were to mutiny, "so would the talukdars, the dispossessed landholders, the Gujars, and the 'budmashes' of India have welcomed the first symptom of governmental weakness as a signal for gratifying their selfish instincts". In short, government weakness would promote self-interested rebellion anywhere, and this one (we note) was created by disappointed lawless nobility and opportunistic criminals. There was more infantilising here too: some of the rebels, wrote Holmes, were like "schoolboys who, though prepared to reverence authority, must find a vent for their inborn love of mischief when they feel that their master is powerless to control them".¹³

Then, shifting his ground, Holmes admitted that there might have been some civil resentment, but stated that if so it was by

the few over measures taken to protect the many. Thus, in some late 19th century British accounts it was no longer acceptable to think that undue interference by Dalhousie and Canning had stirred up feelings and caused a popular rebellion. The duty of government to promote improvement had been too often proclaimed. The problem in 1857 had been insufficiently stern and effective control, and the opposition of old elites that had deserved to be dispossessed. That shrewd well-connected conservative official Harcourt Butler quoted Sir Alfred Lyall: "The wild fanatic outbreak of 1857 was reactionary in its causes and revolutionary in its effects. It shook for a moment the empire's foundations, but it cleared the way for reconstruction and improvement." Pausing only to reflect on Indian autocracy and potential for sudden violence, Butler thus moved on rapidly to the "moving language" of Queen Victoria's conciliatory proclamation (1858).¹⁴

At first sight a French commentator and admirer of the British empire seemed to combine these opposing British perspectives in another study of the rebellion, published in English a little before Keene and Holmes. To Eugene de Valbezen the outbreaks in 1857 could be attributed to latent indiscipline in the army and a "mad panic produced by the spirit of caste" – a mixture of "passion and weakness". He thought the most remarkable thing about the British empire was its imposition by so few upon so many, when the British unlike the Mughals had attempted no social connection with their subjects. The Indian empire could be personified as a British master who preserved his nationality and exclusivity, separated by "an impassable barrier from the natives he has despoiled". Even modern civilisation had "passed over the soil of India without making any impression in it". Nonetheless the revolt was not nationalistic. The Hindus felt jealousy or even hatred towards their foreign rulers, but "in this strange land patriotism does not exist, the feeling of nationality, of independence finds no echo in the population".¹⁵ So it seems that de Valbezen was a child of the revolution who equated nationality and liberty, and also a disciple of the assimilative project of empire undertaken by the French. He did not see the signs that an appreciation of aspects of "modern civilisation" by wealthy and educated Indian elites would help the British to remain in India for generations to

come. Nor did he give weight to the fact that British rule was not sustained or sustainable only by the small mainly European body of men who formed the Indian Civil Service and the officer corps of the army.

II

Among Indians, parallel or related differences of view were also closely connected to underlying attitudes to issues of the day. The most heated debates concerned the nationalistic character of the revolt. V D Savarkar famously dubbed it India's first war of independence; later his followers appropriated it for a Hindu history. Savarkar justified violent resistance, noted Hindu-Muslim cooperation in 1857, and rejected "Muslim domination".¹⁶ After the transfer of power, S B Chaudhuri and R C Majumdar had a celebrated tussle over whether or not it was a popular uprising. Their exchanges summed up the range of meanings attributed to the rebellion in the early years after independence.¹⁷ Their significance will be discussed later. Different aspects were also contained within the conclusions of S N Sen who found that there had been a spontaneous revolt from all sections of the people. He admitted that law-breakers were not necessarily patriots. He studied the multiplicity of actions and motives that combined in the rebellion. He agreed that "the conception of Indian nationality was yet in embryo" and that there was "no conception of individual liberty" either. Given the brutality on all sides, this was certainly not a war between civilisation and barbarism. Nor were Indians pitted against Europeans, because there were at least 20 Indians for every European on the Company side, combatants as well as camp-followers. However, Sen asserted, there was nonetheless a "main movement" that was a popular revolt of a "national" character. The historian was struggling with the patriot, and at first the patriot won. He decided: "No dependent nation can for ever reconcile itself to foreign domination". Then the historian rallied: "The educated Indian at first had no faith in armed rebellion, and the failure of the revolt confirmed him in his conviction. He placed his hopes in British liberalism."¹⁸ Hope thus deferred presumably prepared for the partial fulfilment that was the active but mainly non-violent opposition led by Gandhi.

Abul Kalam Azad, in his preface to Sen's book, wrote with a deliberate balance that summed up the spirit of his cohort of Congress leaders.¹⁹ It was, he said, now time for objective history. The rebellion ought not be a matter of political polemic, as it had been when it was claimed to be a war for the lost privileges of the nobility. Rather, he declared, Indian national character had sunk so low that no agreed leadership could be found to unite the people. Disjointed protests faced an organised and cohesive foe. Even Tatya Tope fled to Maratha territories expecting protection and was hunted down in the forests after being betrayed by a friend. Azad did not need to add that, since then, the Congress had shown Indians how to mobilise and resist. Yet even in 1857 (he also remarked, with an eye to the present and the personal and to Hindu chauvinists that undermined his rejection of propaganda) there had been remarkable cooperation between Hindus and Muslims, and deep residual loyalty to Mughal suzerainty. The British overthrow of Mughal rulers and lack of respect for Indian susceptibilities had fired the rebellion. At the time Azad was president of India. He did not need to worry when he contradicted himself.

General crisis theories have basically believed in a clash of cultures. If not over religion, then it was (following the famous account by Buckler)²⁰ a struggle for political legitimacy. Charles Metcalfe, anticipating de Valbezen, claimed to recall a growing disaffection as British authority was extended with "a cold, unyielding hand".²¹ Some have proposed a broad economic dislocation. However, that is complex and controversial. Stokes emphasised the Company's caution. Bayly and others identified economic and political continuities well into the 19th century. Even among those who believe in significant British impact, there was no unanimity about the damage caused by Company and colonial rule. Morris and McAlpin made often-challenged assumptions about the impact of markets and the nature of the colonial state that implied an improvement (at least after the 1850s) rather than a decline in general well-being.²² By contrast, Michael Mann's stimulating study identified major economic, social and ecological damage in north India even from the early years after British annexation, and an agricultural transformation carried on by cultivators who had to exploit the land beyond its "natural capacity".²³ The real problem, however, is

not in showing economic or other general motives for the rebellion. It is that people who feel aggrieved have a choice of how to act. There may be passivity, avoidance, individual or group protest, political organisation, or insurrection. Common actions require not only a common purpose but generalisable means and understandings. Were these evident in 1857?

Stokes sought particular explanations for peasants by studying the varying details of their agrarian experience. It does not matter greatly to the argument that he concentrated on peasant uprisings and neglected the rebellions to the east and in Awadh.²⁴ His great contribution was his penetrating analysis of the material and local bases of the revolt in many areas. His arguments were of his time (and place, in Cambridge), when self-interest was placed above ideology, just as historical processes outranked "great men".²⁵ Yet the cases analysed by him, augmented by others, show that the uprising was not a coordinated event or even a related set of events. Rather it was a mass of separate happenings and responses that fed off each other. The extent and longevity of revolt related more to group cohesion than disadvantage.²⁶ Stokes need not be understood as implying that Indian people had no ideas that shaped their experience, but only that such mentalité was not very generalised. The vivid diary of Munshi Jeevan Lal, who was "so terrified" at the mutiny of the army that "his heart almost ceased to beat", supports the accidental and impromptu character of the revolt in Delhi.²⁷ Markovits uses the cliché of the prairie fire to describe the spread of the revolt. But a veritable cult, he asserts, has grown up around two now-legendary figures, the unassailable Tatya Tope and Lakshmibai, rani of Jhansi.²⁸ There is still a reluctance to think through the implications of Stokes' work. No serious historian believes the myth of unity among all Indians or even all Hindus that legitimised, in advance, the struggles for independence. But Stokes' findings sit uneasily with popular and much scholarly understanding. Sen's "main movement" remains to this day a primary defence against him, while Stokes shows us instead that, in the main, 1857 was not a movement expressing generic interests, even though there may well have been common grievances. But it is being described as a general movement every time we talk of Indians and the British, or Hindus and Muslims.

III

The colonial and nationalist debates have a surprising amount in common. Both were ahistorical when they reached a level of generality. As said, the stereotypes in the images of 1857 were of two large opponents, Europeans and Indians, and of two components within India: Muslims and Hindus. We know that both are misleading. But both remain fundamental to almost all studies of the rebellion, and certainly are taken to be axiomatic in all popular accounts, both in India and in Britain. Let us consider them in reverse order.

The second stereotype, that of Hindus and Muslims, has been much discussed and the ground need not be covered again in detail. Clearly Indians in 1857 did not obviously comprise the “two main classes” identified by Keene. By this I do not mean that there was no recognisable Islamic sentiment or practice, or no long traditions of brahmanical and kshatriya, or shaivite and vaishnava – or for that matter anti-caste – culture. Identities were re-imagined and re-focused in modern times, not invented. Actions throughout history had depended on very general allegiances across differing classes and regions. I have made this point about the so-called Wahhabis,²⁹ and it is evident in other popular, religious or political movements of the 19th century. General religious sentiment is also to be found among some of those participating in the rebellion. But what Eric Stokes showed was that the larger communal and social categories, much favoured when he was writing, and often adopted by subsequent polemicists, did not work very well to explain behaviour in 1857.

There is an odd ambivalence about advancing such ideas. The understanding of Hindu and Muslim as belated categories of power comes with faultless postcolonial credentials from Foucauldians and others who exaggerate the extent to which allegiances and categories were invented. However, it carries a disreputable colonialist tail. On one hand, there is the journalist and author Beverley Nichols (1898-1983) and his extraordinary attack on Hindus, Gandhi and the “fascist” Congress, written before the fall of Hitler. He began with the standard denial that “Indians” existed and nearly 200 pages later reached his apotheosis in an interview with Jinnah, Asia’s “most important

man" and the "most competent to solve" one of the world's greatest problems. Jinnah had told him that Indian Muslims' outlook was fundamentally different and often radically antagonistic towards the Hindus because they were "different *beings*" and there was "*nothing* in life that linked" them together.³⁰ On the other hand, one might consider the liberal imperial apologist, Edwyn Bevan, who typically justified empire by the service it provided to India, while also condemning the lack of imagination in Englishmen when it came to encouraging Indian advancement. He believed in the "simple-hearted content" of the millions of Indians. And he also saw a great barrier not just in the big communal divisions, but in "all that disintegration of India into little societies with their few common interests".³¹

Any insistence on India's disunity has unfortunate echoes, therefore, of all those Englishmen who excused their empire with an infuriating air of superiority – as if it was more than just a conquest to keep out the French and keep the natives quiet. Thus they hark back to the comparative social history of Henry Maine, with civilisations at different stages of development. Bevan imagined that, however "deplorable the interior condition of a foreign country might be, an English statesman would not be likely to propose to his people to annex [it] out of pure philanthropy".³² From Bevan's own example we might say that few English statesmen in possession of an empire would refrain from proclaiming their altruism.

However, I have written elsewhere that this liberal agenda had its advantages for India,³³ and now compound the offence by denying that Hindus and Muslims operated as fully unitary categories in 1857, let alone as great battalions fighting in a common cause. It then follows that the first stereotype of the rebellion as a conflict between nations is equally suspect. Here we come back to the "main movement" of irreconcilable national resentment. Could it have been a matter of race, after all? I do not underestimate the ferocity of the rebellion and its suppression. Violent animosity was expressed in the massacre in Kanpur and in the barbaric destruction wreaked by the returning British forces on foe and bystander alike. Rage was also directed on all sides against religious buildings and other symbols of opposing systems or ideologies. Many writers, from the very first, referred to deep distrust of British rule. Mainodin

Hassan Khan's narrative, in Metcalfe's translation, claims that the English were "regarded as trespassers" from the first. He attributed the disaffection to Indian oppressors rather than the poor, and believed that there had been a conspiracy.³⁴ There is also much evidence of cultural misunderstanding or race hatred in the contemporary European press and in later memoirs and tales. Canning's "clemency" was despised by many of his countrymen, who agreed with Holmes that the rebellion had been produced because the British had been weak not overbearing.

But, even without the detailed evidence of the nature of local revolts that has now accumulated, it seems wrong-headed to regard the rebellion as a widespread reaction against the British *because they were foreign*. Rule by outsiders (or people of different kind) was the norm rather than the exception in India, and had been for many hundreds of years. Today it may be possible to think towards a common culture and certainly a common allegiance, but in the 1850s even more than now there were multiple cultures and loyalties. Was this "modern" rule under Dalhousie and Canning really more generally intrusive or more offensive for northern India than its predecessors – even its Company predecessors in Madras, Bengal and Bombay? Rulers annoy lots of people all the time, and the Company certainly irritated many in north India in the 1850s. But there is little evidence of a general revulsion at its alien character – more than there had been to, say, Vijayanagar or the Deccani sultans or Aurangzeb or Portuguese Goa or Tipu Sultan. Did those 'sipahis', whose families may have been serving the Company for generations, suddenly decide at Meerut that they objected on principle to taking the coin of the 'firinghi' or 'mleccha'? Did the poor cultivator in Awadh reject the new rule as foreign (as opposed to illegitimate) even supposing he had understood the annexation of 1856? Markovits, attributing the defeat of the rebellion partly to British ruthlessness, writes that 'certains éléments indigènes, sikhs et Gurkha (soldats népalais)' played an important part in the British victory.³⁵ Were they traitors? What did it mean, in 1857, to be indigenous or Nepali?

For the rebellion to have been a reaction against "foreign" rule, the two sides would have needed to be "Indian" and "British" or "Hindu"/"Muslim" and "European". Ethnicity has

to be at the heart of any so-called "Indian" revolt against "British" rule. But this was not a war between races, though its viciousness was portrayed as such. Nor was it a war between advanced and backward civilisations. The fact that the rebels were not "Indians" is the real message of Stokes' revisions about the nature of the uprisings and their motives. At a superficial level this is obvious because of the participants: the mix of supporters and enemies of the British within most of the obvious social, religious and political categories and in different regions, alongside the large numbers who held aloof or changed sides or followed a narrow self-interest. What of the "British"? One cannot simply forget the aforementioned Sikhs and other indigenous combatants, or the Bengalis who had migrated upcountry with British rule and in some cases became victims of the revolt. Metcalfe noted that "Amidst the bloodshed and violence there were found natives loyal and true, whose minds remained unaffected by the madness of the times".³⁶ Again, everyone knows this and forgets it. Ignoring evidence is the way of legend. It is the impulse that in Attenborough's film *Gandhi* depicted a composite Indian government as a full table-load of pompous and braided Europeans. History relates that it contained three well known Indians but that would have spoilt the story. It would have confused the dramatic simplicity of the image – arguably (I do not deny) its dramatic truth. In 1857, too, the rebels' opponents were not "British" if many different kinds of people fought with the returning armies or sustained the government in the rest of the subcontinent. Many Indians whether from loyalty or common humanity also gave succour to European and Christian fugitives. If popular and even scholarly history glosses over these inconvenient complications, that tells us more about the afterlife of the idea of the rebellion than about the rebellion itself.

IV

What were the consequences of this characterisation of the Mutiny as a conflict of communities and nations? To put it another way, what was the context of the heated debates about the nature of the rebellion not only among the European rulers but among Indians soon after independence? Reasons for the British colonial debates have already been suggested and are

too obvious to need further elaboration. I will not pursue here the representation of the revolt by Hindu nationalists. But more can still be said about the Indian reactions.

There were two models of modern nationhood presented to India during colonial rule. They are not usually separated, though they have been implicitly by scholars of international law, for example by James Crawford in a volume discussing the extension of the concept of rights. He advanced a thoroughly intermingled definition of the state as the “social fact of a territorial community of persons with a certain political organisation”. But he then went on, drawing on Sieghart’s definitions, to distinguish between rights relating to sovereignty and rights relating to the continuity of groups.³⁷ Similarly, the first concept of the state that I identify is based around territory. It was reinforced by claims to sovereignty through regulation and policy, and by notions of national interest and state responsibility.³⁸ It produced citizens of the land and the law. It was potentially multicultural. Heterogeneity of class and culture was immaterial to this nationalism because of the common place of birth, the common allegiance to a state, the common subjection to rules, and the common involvement in a national project. This nationality was constructed from actions, jurisdictions and benefits defined within bounded space. As Sugata Bose put it, “modern colonial empires drew heavily from the model of European nation states in their centralised structures and unitary ideologies of sovereignty, and they bequeathed these to postcolonial nation states”.³⁹ Nicholas Dirks too has come to recognise that it is not possible to reconstruct Indian understandings of sovereignty in isolation from European debates.⁴⁰

The second model of nationhood depended on ethnicity and culture. It became important in the history of modern states, especially for its rhetorical force. Here were citizens by type, or the nation as community. It was effectively monocultural. A fundamental homogeneity had to be imagined, regardless of class or other conflicting interests, though of course within perceivable limits and affinities. One touchstone was the degree of constitutional prominence given to the idea of representation. If self-determination were the goal, then the “self” had to be defined. Few if any of those participating in the rebellions of 1857 would have understood either of these

concepts of the nation, and the leaders would have opposed them. The discrepancy helps explain the history of the rebellion as an idea.

In Europe and America, where most of these concepts originated, both elements had tended to come together, but always as a process of linking two distinguishable rationales. In the British Isles there was an imperfect conjuncture between the United Kingdom as a space and the British as a people. The match was better within the constituent states of the union, but at times a necessary commonality was accepted between rich and poor, or Protestant, Catholic and Jew, or Scottish and English. At other times it was fractured. Britain also oscillated between the two models in its plans and laws, sometimes attempting a common citizenship for far-flung peoples in a Commonwealth, and at other times restricting entry to the United Kingdom except for the descendants of former (white) emigrants.

In the US the identity of space has predominated so far, because diverse peoples were defined as American by their arrival on shore and their usurpation and settlement of the land, even when they retained versions of pre-existing identities and cultures. It is no accident that when native Americans had to be conciliated they were given "reservations", or that the majority demand of the excluded blacks (despite the exceptions from Liberia to the Rastafarians or black Muslims) was to have full rights as Americans, as citizens of the republic. To this day, the president must be American-born, and a degree of plurality is assumed within the American way.

Germany, however, was a different case. Its unity was created out of hundreds of political units, and so depended ultimately on the *Volk*, on language and culture. The atrocities of the third Reich were a pathological extension of that logic. Hitler did not demand the integrity of German land and borders; he sought the purity of the supposed German race and its 'Lebensraum'. Despite that warning, in the later twentieth century the resident 'Gastarbeiten' remained "guests", the East Germans were always part of a putative single German nation, and Russian "Germans" absent for generations and often "decultured" had rights to "return" and to belong, just like the Germans of the Sudetenland before them. Italians followed a similar path to

unity, while Greeks, Czechs, Hungarians and Catholic Irish sought to distinguish themselves from larger units or stronger neighbours. It was as peoples that they demanded to be nations. Palestinians and Kurds too have sought land to express their separate nationalities. The Zionist insistence on Israel, a land for the Jews, was another example of the same idea. The demand for Pakistan and the claims of Hindutva are others. The homeland expressed the people and preserved them wherever they are, which is the mirror image of the citizenry defined and contained by the bounded state. Partition and even ethnic “cleansing” are never too far away with this model of nationality as a people.

In south Asia, as elsewhere, the two models or elements co-existed and overlapped. On the one hand, the whole tendency of British rule was towards the creation of a unitary state within borders. In the early years fantasies about place and climate encouraged distinctions between British-born and “country-born” Europeans (though mixed race was also an issue). From the later 19th century, passports were issued to travellers and pilgrims. All residents were “subjects” and their dissent was “sedition”. In the early 20th century the Round Table group and others proposed an imperial federation that included India. At that time Muslims could support Turkey, the Caliph, the Red Crescent, and the ‘umma’ that was the worldwide community of Islam, and yet be Indian nationalists or loyal subjects of the empire.

On the other hand, the British were obsessed with religious communities and ethnicities. The first was more important to them than the second, and indeed everywhere nationalities were mostly cultural. Except in the worst excesses of “scientific” racism, such as the Nazis’ vile selection of “Aryans” among the children of occupied Poland, it had to be culture that sorted out the ethnic Europeans. The British had been asserting a single and special British identity for themselves since the 18th century, and from much earlier as English and Scots. The Greeks claimed nationhood from language and ancient history. The Italians did so in memory of the glories of Rome and the Renaissance. The Irish did so from suffering and song. So it was that Greek independence, Italian unification, Irish freedom and also Japanese and later Chinese nation-building were

appropriate exemplars for India. It was from such comparisons that many claimed that India could never be a nation because of its plurality and political division.

However, Indians too sought histories and characteristics to define themselves. Race, despite Jinnah's claims, was little more than a confusing surrogate for the affinities of culture and history. The very existence of multiple jurisdictions required Indian nationalists to emphasise history, culture, regional economy and broad geography. The nationalists depended upon the assertion of popular identities within or beyond pre-existing political units, rather than on any one existing state, in their search for national identity. Thus they ran the risk of communal divisions that turned into political boundaries, and also of other secessions (Sikhs, dalits, Dravidians) that were avoided. At the same time, some writers – those we have seen and many others – worked themselves into a fury to disparage Indian character and customs. Here too the obvious response for Indians was to celebrate and re-value culture, and to annex or give new meanings to the past, as when Bengalis celebrated Rajput annals, or Muslims or Hindus praised "their" glorious eras or moments, including their heroic sacrifices in 1857. As in Britain (where imperial and military exploits were acclaimed) this was both a product and a means of creating the identity of community.

The balance between the opposing ideas changed over time. The first, territorial mode was dominant in India until about 1920 and the second thereafter. The change of emphasis coincided with the recognition of common interests for "Indians" across the world, from Gandhi in South Africa to his friend C F Andrews in Fiji. Their joint campaign against the conditions of indentured migrants was an early assertion of the importance of the identity of community over that of political territory. The change around this time also was marked by the concession of self-government as a goal for India and the elaboration of national and nationalist institutions and policies: more representative legislature and executives, gradual Indianisation of the army and civil service, membership of international bodies, the enunciation of national strategies for development, trade, and foreign relations. Politicians had to seek out constituencies. Leaders were defined by followers as well as status. Religious symbols proved strong motivators of supporters.

In this context, the Nehru Report (1928) sought compromise within an India union, and the Congress proclaimed its secularism, meaning neutrality between religions. But even these moves already acknowledged the political role of religious identity. Similarly, the original notion of Pakistan assumed a loose union and, to put it crudely, hostages on both sides, with many Muslims in India and many Hindus or Sikhs in undivided Bengal and Punjab. But this plural, territorial vision of nationhood was swallowed by the 20th century dogma of self-determination. The boundary commission was told to draw lines according to the majority religions at the sub-district level. It was an incitement to population transfer and murder.

By this time the British rulers (though not all of British opinion) had come to believe that "Indians" existed and could be represented by leaders. It followed that there would have to be "India". The Montagu-Chelmsford report (1918) conceded that the Indian princely states had to be incorporated in some way within a single though federal polity. It argued too that territorial constituencies were needed to build a self-governing nation, just as an earlier generation of colonial officials had espoused mass education and local self-government with a promise of building civil society and participatory democracy. These were important steps, partly for pushing back racist stereotypes about who was capable of self-rule, and partly for stopping talk of provincial autonomy, long advocated by some on practical grounds and by analogy with Europe. From the 1930s the assumptions whereby the British had divided and ruled led to talks and conferences among representatives that were supposed to produce a plural national unity, ultimately in a constituent assembly for India.

But all these impulses were either inadequate or suppressed in practice. Mass education remained an under-funded dream. Communal electorates were politically expedient. The princely states were kept apart from directly-and then Indian-ruled provinces, an unresolved problem that would cause lasting damage after independence. Thus in the great negotiations towards self-government that dragged on into the 1940s the territorial and the plural declined in significance. The attempt to create the nation as territory was flawed.

It is true despite that failure between Pakistani Muslims and Hindus, that plurality remained a firm and necessary goal in India, and efforts to promote it have helped preserve the union. The weakness or ambiguity of plurality in Pakistan contributed to its dismemberment in 1971. On the other hand, India's position on national identity remains confused. It is notorious that Gandhi was a leader who espoused harmony while valuing and using religion, and who fought to incorporate dalits in an identity that discriminated against them; and that Jawaharlal Nehru was a liberal socialist and internationalist who despised the feudal mindset of religious politics but expressed quasi-mystical reverence for an Indian cultural essence. His annexation of Kashmir asserted territoriality against religious allegiance, but his invasion of Goa proclaimed the supremacy of ethnicity over legal jurisdiction.

On the whole, culture and alleged ethnicity still seem the stronger of the two elements. The existence of effective nationwide institutions has been an advantage for India, in comparison with Pakistan, but even in India the role of Hindu-ness and the struggle for linguistic states have signalled the choice of community rather than territory as the primary identity. At Partition officials on both sides organised the "repatriation" of prisoners, patients and women on the basis of religion and not birthplace, at the same time as Indian politicians were proclaiming that secularism and non-sectarianism were guiding moral principles of the new state.⁴¹ In what would be a contravention of British laws (if they applied in these cases), the Indian government has offered visa privileges to British-born persons of south Asian descent (provided they have "Hindu" names), while giving fewer privileges to other British applicants. On the other hand, confusingly, it required British citizens with south Asian "Muslim" names to prove that their parents were not born in what is now Pakistan.

The representation of the rebellion of 1857-58 as an "Indian revolt" provided a myth, a history and heroes, of the cultural or ethnic kind. Sikhs and the many others who fought with the British were thus traitors to their national identity, though this uncomfortable conclusion is glossed over in such accounts. By contrast Queen Victoria's proclamation, also much noticed by aspirant sectors of the people of India, was an enunciation of the

territorial principle and of plurality whereby all subjects of the Crown were entitled to equality of respect and treatment, whatever their creed or race. The colonial arguments about 1857 were thus in part arguments about the nature of India and the way it should be ruled. Indian arguments after Independence were similarly debates about Indian nationhood. They continue to this day. Is there a multicultural polity or a monocultural identity? The answer could be discerned in what happened in 1857-58, whether or not there was a “main movement” that was a “national” rejection of the “foreigner”. I do not say that individuals necessarily recognised what they were arguing about, though some did (such as Savarkar). I suggest the debates were in parallel at a subliminal level. In particular, the afterlife of the rebellion, by posing a conflict of all “classes” between indigenous and alien, or Indian and British, helped forge a necessary history of both nations as identities.

NOTES

- 1 Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed. The Indian Rebellion of 1857*, C A Bayly (ed), Oxford, 1986, pp 2-4. It is curious that to this day nations are defined and legitimised by violence.
- 2 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Cambridge Mass and London, 2006, p 124.
- 3 See Peter Robb, *Empire, Identity, and India: Peasants, Political Economy, and Law* [vol 2], New Delhi, 2006, chapter 5. Citing law as a positive influence (for example, to develop free labour) used to raise objections from those who regarded it only as an instrument of class oppression. But its mixed character has always existed and been obvious – from the abolition of slavery to the international criminal court. Aditya Sarkar’s forthcoming London PhD will explore these issues in regard to Indian factory law.
- 4 Stokes, *Peasant Armed*, p 1. The point is quoted by Claude Markovits in the volume he edited, *Histoire de l'Inde moderne 1480-1950*, [Paris] 1994, p 337.
- 5 For example, many have followed the argument in T R Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt. India, 1857-1870*, Princeton 1964, that there was much continuity in colonial policy before and after 1857. That is somewhat qualified by the misrule and neglect of the tenantry in favour of the landholders in Awadh, as discussed in Jagdish Raj, *The Mutiny and British Land Policy in North India, 1856-68*, Bombay, 1965, and in many works since. The British were “disillusioned” with the tenants because they had supported the taluqdars in 1857, and were slow to appreciate the further discontent that therefore would emerge later. On the popular character of the revolt in Awadh see T R Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and British Raj*, Princeton 1979, chapter 7, and Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Delhi, 1984.

- 6 H G Keene, *History of India from the Earliest Times to the Present Day for the Use of Students and Colleges*, vol II, London, 1893. For the following see chapter xx.
- 7 Ibid, p 277.
- 8 Malleson wrote copiously on the mutiny and rebellion, but the reference is to G B Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny* (6 vols), J W Kaye (ed), London, 1888 and to J W Kaye, *History of the Sepoy War in India* (3 vols), London, 1867. Kaye's position may also be judged from the title of another of his works, *The Administration of the East India Company: A History of Progress*, London, 1853.
- 9 Ian Stephen, *Pakistan*, London 1963, 2nd ed, 1964, p 69.
- 10 C T Metcalfe, *Two Native Narratives of the Mutiny in Delhi*, Westminster, 1898; Delhi, 1974, p 8.
- 11 Al Carthill, *The Lost Dominion*, Edinburgh and London, 1924, pp 191-93 and 235.
- 12 T Rice Holmes, *A History of the Indian Mutiny* (London, 1883; first revised edition, 1904), pp vii and passim. Holmes was a celebrated historian of the Roman empire and early Britain.
- 13 Ibid, pp 558 and 560.
- 14 Sir Harcourt Butler, *India Insistent*, London, 1931, pp 66-67. The proclamation's later influence was begun by its translation into 20 languages and public readings in towns and cantonments throughout British India.
- 15 E de Valbezen, *The English and India: New Sketches*, 2nd ed of anonymous translation from French (London 1881), reprint, Delhi, 1986, pp 370-75. The first edition, *Les Anglais et l'Inde*, was published in Paris in 1857, and further editions continued at least until 1875. De Valbezen had been French consul-general in Calcutta.
- 16 V D Savarkar, *India's First War of Independence*, London, 1909; Bombay, 1947 (etc).
- 17 R C Majumder, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Calcutta, 1957, and S B Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies*, Calcutta, 1957. See also Chaudhuri's *Theories of the Indian Mutiny*, Calcutta, 1965.
- 18 S N Sen, *Eigh:een Fifty-Seven*, New Delhi, 1957, pp 398-418; quotations from pp 417-18.
- 19 Ibid, see especially pp xv-vi and xvii.
- 20 F W Buckler, 'The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, v (1922).
- 21 Metcalfe, *Narratives*, p 6.
- 22 See E T Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and the Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1978, especially chapter 1; C A Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge, 1983; Michelle Burge McAlpin, *Subject to Famine*, Princeton 1983; and M D Morris, 'Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth-century Indian Economic History' in Morris et al, *The Indian Economy in the Nineteenth Century*, Delhi, 1969.
- 23 Michael Mann, *British Rule on India Soil: North India in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, tr Benedict Baron, New Delhi, 1999.

- 24 See Bayly's comments in Stokes, *Peasant Armed*, pp 236-37, that the revolt in Awadh was nearly as particularist and localised as elsewhere.
- 25 Ibid. Bayly's remarks on this neglect of ideology. He mentions the Indian Wahhabis, while recalling however that in his teaching Stokes invoked Buckler and his view of the lasting salience of Mughal sovereignty (pp 238-39), and that he would not have denied the importance of ideas. Bayly also notes that Stokes said little about contingent and accidental factors (pp 240-41).
- 26 Stokes was anticipated by Sir George Campbell's analysis in his *Memoirs of My Indian Career*, London, 1893, discussed in Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge, 1972, which remains the best short account of Muslim attitudes and British policy towards them.
- 27 Metcalfe, *Narratives*, p 76.
- 28 Markovits, *Histoire*, pp 340 and 344.
- 29 See Peter Robb, *Empire, Identity, and India: Liberalism, Modernity, and the Nation* [vol 1], New Delhi, 2006, chapter 7.
- 30 Beverley Nichols, *Verdict on India*, London, 1944; see pp 188-90.
- 31 Edwyn Bevan, *Indian Nationalism: An Independent Estimate*, London, 1913; see chapters I, II and V, and pp 65, 70 and 121-22. Bevan (1870-1943) was a historian and philosopher based at King's College London.
- 32 Ibid, p 25. This was to explain the first acquisition of empire. He did not have the advantage of living in the age of Bush and Blair.
- 33 This is a theme of Robb, *Empire – Liberalism*.
- 34 Metcalfe, *Narratives*, pp 31, 37.
- 35 Markovits, *Histoire*, pp 345-46. It is worth saying that any ideological differences discernible between French and British historians of the rebellion are dispelled in Markovits' judicious summary.
- 36 Metcalfe, *Narrative*, p 2.
- 37 James Crawford (ed), *The Rights of Peoples*, Oxford, 1992, pp 55-57; see also the preface. Underlying his point were firstly the distinction between individual, collective or people's (community) and state rights, and secondly the list from Paul Sieghart (*The International Law of Human Rights*, Oxford, 1983), including rights attributable or relevant to self-determination, treaties, sovereignty, development, environment, and minorities, to which Crawford added (if indeed it is different) any groups' right to exist.
- 38 See Peter Robb, *Empire – Liberalism, and Empire – Peasants*.
- 39 Bose, *Hundred Horizons*, p 59. He adds 'as poisoned legacies' but (leaving aside arbitrarily-created states in Africa, the west Asia and elsewhere) it is hard to see that India would have fared better if it had been fragmented, decentralised or, like Tibet, not recognised within borders. In the case of Pakistan the territory, I argue, was a second-order issue after community. Territoriality in itself did not require partition.
- 40 Nicholas B Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire. India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, Cambridge Mass and London 2006, p xv.
- 41 I owe this remark to a paper given in SOAS by Gyanendra Pandey. See his *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, 2001.

Multiple Meanings of 1857 for Indians in Britain

Michael H Fisher

NEWS from India about the bloody fighting of 1857 shocked people in Britain, including the thousands of Indians of all classes settled or sojourning there. Each Indian living in London or elsewhere in Britain had to decide whether the anti-British violence by many of their countrymen in India was justified. Further, each also had to choose how to act toward Britons, including British lover, wife or husband, friend, employer, or passer-by on the street. Virtually all Indians – despite the variety of their backgrounds, personal feelings toward the fighting in India, or places in British society – experienced rising British prejudice. Indian men in particular became the focus of British sexual fears. Consequently, many Indians in Britain felt even stronger solidarities with each other as they faced a collective hostility from the Britons around them.

As demonstrated in this volume, prominent historians and other commentators have discussed many of the meanings of 1857. Some have considered the disparate roles and responses of various Britons and Indians in India; others have analysed the opinions and public policies of Britons in Britain. This article complements that distinguished work by highlighting how the many and diverse Indians within British society related themselves to those events and also the ways in which British attitudes toward them altered prior to, during, and after 1857.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INDIANS IN BRITAIN TO 1857

While people from India have been travelling to Britain since about 1600, the burgeoning British empire and its expanded transportation networks in Asia from the late 18th century

onward meant that ever more Indians of all classes decided to make this journey [Visram 2002; Fisher 2006; Fisher, Lahiri, Thandi 2007]. In India over the century prior to 1857, the East India Company conquered and annexed hundreds of kingdoms covering 1.6 million square kms and including roughly three-quarters of the population; India's other 8,00,000 square kms and quarter of the population remained under approximately 500-600 nominally sovereign Indian "princes" who kept their thrones but struggled under British indirect rule and feared annexation. All this made the East India Company the largest employer of Indians through its armies, civil administration and commercial undertakings. Additionally, most Indians had to deal in one way or another with the East India Company's revenue collectors, judicial courts, postal or educational systems, or political agents.

Largely as a result of their forced relationship with Britons and British authorities, a total of some 30,000 to 40,000 Indians had ventured to Britain by the early 1850s. Most went for work, particularly the thousands of 'lascars' (seamen) and male and female servants who went each year. Some of these labourers settled there, as did the wives of Britons and also various Indian entrepreneurs and teachers. Others, including students and tourists, visited temporarily in order to learn about the society and culture that had conquered India so rapidly and extensively. Many others, including merchants, landholders, princes and employees of the British, who had found no redress for their grievances at the hands of British colonial officials or officers in India, believed that they would receive justice if they could personally present petitions directly to the British monarch, parliament, judicial system, or the East India Company's court of directors. Enough of these appellants did indeed obtain redress or advancement (or at least promises of these) for more Indians to be encouraged to make this journey. Some found employment as landlords, advisors, servants or translators for later Indian arrivals. All learned from personal experience living there about broader British society, the global context of colonialism and the possibilities for action. None of these perspectives were as visible from the confines of colonised India.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the position and reception of an Indian in British society had depended greatly on his

or her background, both collective (socio-economic class, religious community, gender and regional origin) and individual (degree of Anglicisation, physical features and particular personal relationships and circumstances). Many Britons had interacted easily with Indians who appeared to be of their own socio-economic class and regarded Indian aristocrats as comparable with European peers. Britons identified Indians using a wide and imprecise range of terms and categories including "Asiatic", "Oriental", "Orientalist", "East Indian", "Indian" and "Black", occasionally classing them together with Africans, Afro-Caribbean people and foreigners generally. The very vagueness of British understanding of what it meant to be "Indian" gave scope to early Indians to shape to some degree how they were received by the Britons around them.

Some Indians had chosen to merge into British society, appreciating the relative acceptance of them by Britons of their own economic class, compared to the more racially-divided situation in colonial India. In 1844, one scholar-diplomat in London contrasted relatively welcoming British society with the condescending or contemptuous attitudes of Britons in India: "The fact is, that the more you proceed on towards England, the more you find the English people endowed with politeness and civility...." [Lutfullah 1857]. Many Indians, including virtually all Indian settlers, had Anglicised their dress, deportment and names, converted (at least nominally to Christianity) and married a Briton. Symptomatic of British acceptance of Indians were the high levels of intermarriage by Indian men and women with native Britons.

Many Indian male visitors and settlers had long regarded their own relatively easy familiarity with British women in Britain as empowering; numerous Indian male authors suggested or explicitly discussed this phenomenon (which Tavakoli-Targhi labels "Euroeroticism" [Tavakoli-Targhi 1993]). Indeed, the situation in the metropole powerfully contrasted to that in India where British colonialists had long strongly asserted their racial separation and superiority, and especially stressed the prevention of social or sexual relations between British women and Indian men. Thus, once in Britain, many Indian men considered their relationship with a British woman as valuable not only for their personal gratification and enhancing their own

personal self-esteem, but also for providing an entrée into British society and an appreciation of Indian gender morality in contrast to Britain sexual laxity.

Eventually, however, British military conquests and growing colonial empire in Asia convinced most Britons of the inherent supremacy of their culture and race. Missionaries and other “reformers” increasingly asserted the superiority of Christianity and British values over conquered Asian peoples. British stereotypes about non-Whites sporadically but increasingly entered metropolitan society from the colonies, making it ever more difficult for many Indians living in British society to shape how they would be received.

Conversely, as British cultural assertions came to dominate the Indian colonialised, the expectations held by people about to leave for Britain shifted. As Partha Chatterjee explains, in contrast to an 18th century Indian visitor who had no “prior mental map imprinted on his mind telling him how England ought to be seen”, a late 19th century one already knew what he would find: He “would have no doubt that what he was experiencing, and what he would need to convey to his countrymen back home, was a moral and civilisational essence, expressed in such virtues of the modern English people as the spirit of independence, self-respect and discipline, their love for art, literature and sport, and above all, their cultivation of knowledge” [Chatterjee 1998].

During the decades leading up to 1857, many Indians in Britain developed class and other solidarities with each other to support them in this alien environment. The largest community of working-class Indians emerged in London’s east end docklands. From the 1790s until 1834, the East India Company contracted with British entrepreneurs to provide barracks for transient Indian seamen until they could be shipped back to India. In particular, the massive barracks off the Ratcliffe Highway not far from east London’s docks formed the centre of a substantial Indian working-class community composed not only of Indian lascars, but also of dismissed servants and the occasional impoverished diplomat. In 1834, parliament’s suspension for 20 years of the East India Company’s charter to trade in India ended the contract for this barracks. This community of lascars and other Indians then moved slightly east to London’s Poplar

and Limehouse area, even nearer the East India Docks. There arose an array of private lodging houses, often under the managements of Indian entrepreneurs attended by their British wives or mistresses, anchoring a service-based and Indian-centred community widely known as the “Oriental Quarter”. This neighbourhood provided congenial living space and entertainment to transient Indian seamen, with an estimated 3,000-3,600 arriving annually in the early 1850s [Visram 1986: 52]. Other Indians, even if they lived elsewhere, including servants of diplomatic delegations, also visited this neighbourhood for the distinctively Indian companionship, cuisine, entertainment, and other pleasures available there.

Reflecting growing British distrust of this self-regulated Oriental Quarter in the imperial capital, Christian missionaries and other social reformers established a replacement for it, an institution that was under their control. In 1842, the Church Missionary Society surveyed and reported the *State of the Lascars in London*. Evangelicals proposed a charity house, and gathered £15,000 (including Indian donations totalling £ 5,000) to fund it. In 1856, ‘The Strangers’ Home for Asiatics, Africans, and South Sea Islanders’ opened in Commercial-road, Limehouse, under its secretary and manager, lieutenant-colonel R Marsh Hughes, late of the East India Company’s army. This institution’s name linked various ethnicities of the working classes collectively as “Strangers”, reflecting current British attitudes. The Home (which remained open until 1927) assumed many paternalistic functions over working-class Indians in Britain, including caring for and controlling them and arranging for their employment on the passage home.

During the early 19th century as well, the increasingly numerous Indian diplomatic and political missions to London also provided centres for distinctly Indian social life there. Some 30 embassies from deposed or threatened Indian princes, or the princes themselves, had reached London by 1857. Once in Britain, the most effective among these ambassadors – including Raja Rammohun Roy who lived there during the last three years of his life (1831-33) representing Mughal emperor Muhammad Akbar II – learned about and manoeuvred through the world of British politics, often aligning with British opposition politicians in critiquing and embarrassing the British government or East

India Company administration in India. Some successfully obtained enhanced pensions and influence in high British society including with the British monarch. While no official British policies in India were reversed by the lobbying and bribing done by these Indian delegations, colonial officials apparently restrained themselves somewhat from particularly egregious annexations or other imperial assertions by the knowledge that their deeds would face hostile scrutiny in London. Some of these missions included large numbers of men and women of all classes. For example, the delegation from Awadh headed by the queen mother Jenabi Auliah Tajara Begum, had well over a hundred dignitaries, scribes, servants and slaves; it gained further followers while in London from various Indians who had ventured there independently to seek employment. Also present between 1850 and 1857 were delegations from Bahwalpur, Jodhpur, Nagpur, Nepal, Rampur, Satara, Sindh, Surat and the exiled Maratha Peshwa. Further, living in London during those years were various aristocrats including: prince Gholam Mahomed, the son of Tipu Sultan; maharaja Dulip Singh of the Punjab; princes Hafiz Ludroo Islam Khan and Hyder Jung of the Carnatic; maharaja Veer Rajunder Wadiar of Coorg with his daughter, Gauriamma; and David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre, their of the deposed Begum Somru of Sardhana (he had been elected first Indian member of the British Parliament, 1841-42).

Scattered through the more fashionable sections of the imperial capital, mansions rented by Indian diplomats and other aristocrats also provided spaces for hierarchic socialising among the various other Indian visitors and settlers in London, as well as various British supporters and hangers-on, each class in its own place. In the finest rooms, Indian elites met and exchanged their experiences of British society and politics. Accounts from both Indian and British sources recorded the various gatherings among these men and women, as they (divided by gender and often religious community): dined in various configurations; celebrated each others' holidays; and commiserated over their respective successes and frustrations dealing with British authorities and society.¹ Simultaneously, the many scribes and other attendants attached to these missions likewise shared their own quarters and views with each other and with Indians of their

respective classes. These included scholars, teachers, translators and others settled in British society. Often in the kitchens, the servants of the various missions entertained each other with food, music and other entertainment, as well as informed each other about life in London.

British participants described such social gatherings, for example, among servants in the kitchen of the mansion (15 Warwick Road, Paddington) where the Nawab of Surat's mission lived (1853-57):

...after dinner, which generally took place about seven o'clock, cards and tea were always placed on the table, visitors from other families would drop in...the dhol or native drum would be brought forward, a series of native songs sung... a long table, capable of seating about fifteen persons...was occupied by the card-players, the interval being usually filled up by tea and coffee drinkers and smokers [Salter 1873, pp 55-56].

This observer also patronisingly depicted how members of other delegations and other working-class Indians joined this gathering:

The inmates of Harley House [the members of the Awadh delegation which arrived in 1856], however, were not long in discovering that a colony of Orientals was already established in London, and their number was soon increased by deserters from ships, and the Asiatic vagrants of the metropolis, and all soon made acquaintance with the suite of the Nawab of Surat. Some of them came into the kitchen of the Nawab...winter was then approaching and the cold autumnal winds blew with terrible effect on the naked legs of the visitors. English boots and stockings were produced by the servants of the Nawab; the boots were examined and approved of, but the stockings excited deep curiosity, and were the subject of much discussion as they were handed about for inspection.

Thus, the shared experiences in dealing with conditions in London bonded these Indians from different regions and cultures into a solidarity, and the accumulated knowledge of earlier visitors passed orally to later ones.

British public opinion toward these often colourful Indian delegations proved mixed and shifted adversely against them over the first-half of the 19th century. On the one hand, these exotic-looking ambassadors and their entourages brought colour and panoply to London as an imperial capital. On the other

hand, growing British imperial confidence degraded the significance of these Indian missions while contempt for oriental despotism made them appear as archaic demonstrations of Indian backwardness, contrasting with British modernity and progress. For example, in 1856 the *Times* noted the exotic display of the aristocracy among the Awadh delegation, but depicted their attendants as dirty drugged loafers who alienated the space in Britain that they occupied:

Although the appearance of the Princesses and principal attendants is most superb by reason of the elaborate and costly dresses with which they are attired, the mass of the inferior servants present an unusually filthy and unsightly group. Ranging on the basement floors of the hotel are large numbers continually to be seen lounging in the most careless manner, or squatting before a charcoal fire either cooking some article of food or indulging in the fumes derived from a dirty opium pipe. The entire floor of this portion of the hotel is strewed with the clothing of the inhabitants, and in appearance much resembles the back premises of an extensive rag merchant, the whole being rendered more unpleasant by the quantity of dirt which each article of dress apparently contains [Times, August 28, 1856].

Simultaneously, the *Times* also criticised misguided Britons as mesmerised by this insubstantial oriental luxury and veiled sexuality:

...at present the interest excited is one of mere vulgar curiosity on the part of the multitude, who desire only to see the dresses and appointments of the servants and followers, and greedily drink in the absurd tales of the fabulous wealth and jewels belonging to the Royal party, which have been industriously circulated. Besides the usual rabble of boys consequent on such occasions, numbers of respectably dressed persons, with now and then a carriage filled with occupants, are to be seen intently gazing at the exterior of the Royal York Hotel, where the illustrious party is located, and great pains are frequently taken to secure a sight of the ladies of the Royal party, who sometimes take a sly peep from the upper apartments upon the congregated numbers assembled in the streets below.

Thus, some British newspapers recorded gawking British and alien Indians observing each other.

In addition to their reluctance to spend money, the newspapers attributed unpleasant odours to them as a "race" apart. Indeed, the hotel that they rented would allegedly be unfit for respectable

people (i.e., Europeans) for some time: "Mr White, the proprietor, received 100£ for the use of his premises during the 10 days they have been occupied; and we do not doubt that it will be at least as many more days before the establishment will be again rendered fit to be used as the residence of a European" [Times, September 1, 1856]. Thus, British racial prejudice was rising in Britain even before news of the events of 1857 reached them.

Many of the Indians in Britain during the decades leading up to 1857 recognised how expanding British colonialism and racial prejudice against Indians generally should bond Indians together. Mixing in London with people from many other Indian regions often overcame traditional cultural and political distinctions more effectively than was occurring in India at this time. Particularly articulate both about such British discrimination and also the need for a collective response to British aggression was Maratha diplomat, Rango Bapojee, who spent 13 years in London (1839-53). In 1842, Bapojee complained in writing there about slights he had personally received and the "oppression set upon our race and colour" collectively by prejudiced Britons [Bapojee letters January 24, 1842, March 12, 1842 reprinted in *East India Company 1841-43*, Vol 2, pp 1301-02; Vol 3, pp 28-30]. Bapojee also delivered public speeches in London and published his insightful analysis of British imperialism globally. He claimed to speak as one voice on behalf of "the hundred and 50 millions of my fellow-countrymen" [Bapojee 1846, p 2]. In 1849, Bapojee wrote a rallying "Circular to Princes and Chiefs in India", which he sent to all the Indian rulers back in India, warning them against the insidious British practice of piecemeal annexation that was evident only from the perspective of Britain.² Before he left Britain in utter frustration at how he had been mistreated by both British authorities and also particularly racist members of the British public, Bapojee passed on his hard-earned experience to newly arriving diplomats, including Azimullah Khan who, along with Mohammed Ali Khan, represented in London the exiled Maratha Peshwa Dhundu Pant, "Nana Sahib" from 1853-55.

Azimullah, both during his three years in Britain as an ambassador and also later during the fighting of 1857, particularly embodied the changes in British culture toward Indian men. Although received in some aristocratic British salons as a

peer, he apparently had arisen from lower-class origins. Losing his father while a child, he was fostered in Kanpur, UP, by British missionaries from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, while his widowed mother allegedly worked as their 'ayah'. These missionaries taught him English and French and then used him as a teacher at their "Cawnpore Free School". Dhundu Pant was reportedly one of his students. Azimullah went on to serve as 'munshi' to British generals but, when accused of bribery and dismissed, he entered Dhundu Pant's service in 1851. Azimullah then rose to the status of Dhundu Pant's diplomatic representative to the British in 1853.

In Britain, Azimullah's reputation as a putative "prince" from the "exotic east" attracted the attentions, and even the affections, of various elite British women. In particular, he became the protégé and long-term houseguest of Lady Lucie Duff-Gordon, [Gordon 1886] an author and traveller who had married the prime minister's cousin, Alexander Duff-Gordon, a gentleman usher to the queen [Frank 1994]. Although only about 10 years older, she took a maternal attitude toward him. She claimed to have educated Azimullah in British culture and politics, falsely believing she had convinced him to adopt pro-British sentiments. She wrote to a friend, Lord Lansdowne:

I have got my Musselman friend Khan living here, and he quite provokes me by his delight at the beauty of the snow... You wd be amused at the incessant questioning that goes on - I have gone through such a course of political economy & all social sciences day after day & had to get so many books for my pupil to devour that I feel growing quite solemn & pedantic. [Azimullah] who came over with a strong dislike to the English has become an enthusiastic Englishman & will go home with very reforming notions to his own people [for her letters see Frank 1994].

Even after his return to India, she signed her letters to him "your affect. Mother", and he addressed her as "European Mother" in reply.

Additionally, Azimullah made himself popular with nubile British women. He reportedly cantered with great panache on the Brighton Downs, surrounded by a crowd of adoring horse-women. In particular, he developed an intimate relationship with one of them; to protect her reputation, British commentators referred to her as 'Miss A'. After Azimullah's return to India,

she reportedly wrote adoring letters, partly in French, expressing her continued desire to marry him.

Not all Britons, especially those with experience in India, accepted or approved of Azimullah, however. John Lang, a British journalist and lawyer who had earlier spent years in India, trumpeted his own access to "Oriental women", including Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. Lang reported in detail how the Rani personally entreated him to serve as her attorney in recovering Jhansi, even flirting and revealing her (well-clothed) body to him as part of the enticement for him to represent her [Lang 1861]. Back in Britain, Lang continued his Orientalist attitudes: when introduced in British high society to "the prince" Azimullah, Lang responded "Prince indeed! He has changed my plate 50 times in India [i e, as a table-servant]" [Keene 1897, p 162n].

Nonetheless, the generally warm social reception received by Azimullah from British women contrasted with the cold official one his mission faced. He and Mohammed Ali Khan submitted Dhundu Pant's documents, which the East India Company directors rejected and refused to discuss with them. Frustrated in their diplomacy in Britain, they left for home in June 1855. Significantly, they deliberately travelled via the trenches of the Crimean war (1853-56) where they personally observed the British army ineffectively fighting the Russians; this war demonstrated to them that the British were not invincible [Russell 1860, Vol 1, pp 165-67].

Many other Indian men met similar receptions in Britain. They received honoured receptions by some Britons – including British aristocrats and especially aristocratic women – who projected onto them Orientalist fantasies and received them as royalty in London's salons. While these fantasies were not accurate, they nonetheless often proved flattering and socially and politically advantageous to the Indian visitor deemed aristocratic in Britain. In contrast, other Britons – particularly British men with experience in the colonies where racial prejudices and segregation had been long central pillar of colonial rule – treated upwardly-mobile Indians in Britain as even more dangerous than they appeared to be in India, as a threat to the pillar.

Further, once back in India, many of these Indians faced redoubled prejudice from British colonisers who feared that the

honoured reception these Indians had received in Britain would make them pretentious and insubordinate. For example, one British reporter bristled when, Azimullah, on returning to India "boasted a good deal of his success in London society, and used the names of people of rank very freely, which, combined with the tone of his remarks induced me to regard him with suspicion, mingled, I confess, with dislike" [Russell 1860, Vol 1, pp 165-67].

THE EFFECTS OF 1857

When word of the 1857 conflict reached Indians in Britain, virtually all recognised that they had to make a visible choice, whatever their private sentiments. Most of those supportive of the insurrection dared not express that in the face of an almost uniformly hostile British society. Some publicly professed their loyalty to Britain and opposition to the "mutineers", hoping to use this crisis to their own political or personal advantage, or at least to mitigate its disadvantages. Of those who returned to India, some faced accusations of treason, arrest and interrogation by British authorities. Indeed, some of the most prominent who fought against the British in India had been embittered by prejudice and injustice that they personally experienced during their own time in Britain. Typically, Azimullah, Mohammed Ali Khan and Rango Bapojee all evidently fought the British in 1857. Mohammed Ali Khan and Bapojee's son were summarily executed without trial. Despite the £ 50 reward that the British put on Bapojee's head and the extensive British manhunt for Azimullah, they evaded capture and disappeared. Thus, long experience in Britain raised these men's awareness of colonialism and sense of patriotism for India.

Further, the sporadically arriving news of the outbreak of the 1857 fighting destroyed most remaining public or official sympathy for all Indian diplomats currently there. Nevertheless, several missions persisted. To have any hope of success, however, they had now additionally to protest their loyalty to the British. For example, the ambassadors from Awadh sent a petition to the House of Lords in which they expressed their "...sincere regret [at] the tidings which have reached the British kingdom of disaffection prevailing among native troops in

India". They assured the British government that they themselves were "a Royal race, ever faithful and true to their friendship with the British nation" [Great Britain, Parliament 1858, House of Lords debate August 6, 1858, series 3, vol 147, pp 1119-22; *Times*, August 8, 1857]. Nevertheless, the Lords rejected their petition on a technicality, since it omitted the required term "Humble" in places where protocol repeatedly demanded it. Even the petition's sponsor, Lord Campbell, excused himself for having submitted it, which he said he did out of duty alone. Then, in November 1857, the Awadh delegation unrealistically offered to reconquer and rule India for queen Victoria: "We propose that the Prince Mirza Md Hamid Allie Bahadur Heir Apparent to the King of Oude now resident in England should immediately proceed to India supported by a British Force and in the name of the King of Oude should assume the government of the Country and call upon the People to rally round the Standard of the Sovereign against the revolted Sepoys" (letter October 28, 1857, Political Department Home Correspondence; Minutes of the Court of Directors November-December 1857). They cited the precedent of Dost Muhammad, ruler of Afghanistan, whom the British had once imprisoned in Calcutta but who was supporting them in 1857. This proposal met no encouragement from the British.

Other Indian diplomats in London had to adopt the same position of protesting loyalty to a disbelieving British public. For instance, Mehdi Ali Khan Bahadur of Rampur, who had gone to London in 1856 in order to gain the title and estate of his late father-in-law, the Nawab, initially proved able to obtain the support of members of Parliament. News of the events of 1857, however, put paid to his chances, and left him in a dilemma. To return to India might appear disloyal to the British, so, whatever his true personal feelings, he wrote the directors assuring them of his loyalty and begging them not to misinterpret his departure for home which was solely on the basis of his "health" (Minutes of the Court of Directors October 16, 1857 to April 14, 1858).

Indeed, the British government and directors increasingly pressurised other Indian diplomatic delegations to leave. They instructed Ali Morad of Sindh to abandon his campaign for restored sovereignty and go "manifest your zeal and fidelity in

the service of the British government" back in India (August 19, 1857, Political Department Home Correspondence). Likewise, Syed Uckbur Ally and Khirat Ali Khan Bangash of Jodhpur had been in London since 1851 representing Raja Tuckt Singh. In September 1857, they submitted petitions to the Company's directors and to the House of Commons which proclaimed: "the devoted friendship and zeal displayed by the Prince my master upon the breaking out of the deplorable occurrences that now convulse the portions of India contingent to his possessions and the promptitude with which (as I learn from the public press) he came to the assistance of the British government... [showing] his unwavering loyalty" by sending 5,000 troops to support the British [Minutes of the Court of Directors, East India Company, British Library April 9, 1857 to October 14, 1857].

As some Indians, including diplomats and their attendants, left London for India, however, they became the focus of widespread suspicion by Britons there. For example, on their arrival in Bombay, the Jodhpur ambassadors, their servants and their English attorney were all arrested on charges of treason. The British ship captain testified against them:

the Mahomedan secretary [Khirat Ali Khan Bangash of Jodhpur], in my presence and in the presence of the passengers, said that he could murder [Governor-General] Lord Dalhousie without remorse, and throw his body to the vultures, or something to that effect...He frequently expressed his sympathy with the rebels and mutineers, and expressed his wishes for their success. He frequently stated that the country would be much better governed under native princes and rulers than by the English [Great Britain, Parliament 1859, (Sessionals) Commons, Vol 18, p 73, No 125, Return March 4, 1859].

The ship captain added for good measure that one of their servants, Mirjan, had immorally abandoned his English wife back in London.

Not all who came to Britain turned against them in 1857. General Jung Bahadur Rana of Nepal had come to Britain in 1850 where he was treated royally.³ As his British hosts hoped, he was impressed by the display of British military and industrial power. In 1857, he proved among the staunchest political and military supporters of the British.

Overall, the sudden and shocking news of the events in 1857 particularly focused and hardened British attitudes against

Indian men in more powerful ways than ever before. Lurid rumours and reports flooded London about atrocities by Indian sepoys and servants against British women and children, including mass rapes and murders, which highlighted gendered differences of racial identity and led to a British national hysteria. Most Britons suddenly saw all Indian males as dangerous, particularly to white women. Indian men's hitherto relatively easy relationships in Britain with British women of their own economic class now became seen by many Britons as charged with racial and sexual transgression. Indian women, in India, did not apparently draw as much hostile attention despite the prominence of the Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, these women either appearing as romantic heroines or masculinised warriors. Nor did the British press comment on the sexual violations of Indian women by British soldiers. Rather, most of the alleged atrocities involved male protagonists with British women as subjects, either of molestation by Indian men or revenge by British men.

Only a few Britons dared express toleration, saying Indians, especially men they had known, could not be as bad as news and rumours portrayed. For example, after rumours of Azimullah's alleged participation in the Kanpur "massacre" of British prisoners by Nana Sahib reached her, his patron and nominal "mother", Lady Duff-Gordon, wrote:

I am quite unable to believe that [Azimullah] could approve or endure the atrocious conduct...[but] I am singular...in giving...my sympathy to the natives who are between two millstones - first tyrannised by the sepoys...and then harried by the English...The English victims at least will have vengeance and subscriptions, but who will pity the poor, helpless mass of people guilty of the offence of a dark skin and a religion of their own? What a vista of disaster & hatred is before us and them!

[quoted in Frank 1994, pp 190-91].

Even distinctively sympathetic Britons came to regard all Indian men with suspicion and a sense of betrayal. Many Britons expected their Indian acquaintances to "prove" their trustworthiness by speaking or acting against the "mutineers".

Even working-class Indians in London encountered the sudden opprobrium of appearing to be a "hostile". For example, a Bengali named Joaleeka had come to London with

Prince Gholam Mohamed, youngest son of Tipu Sultan, in 1854. Rather than return to India with his employer, Joaleeka stayed on in London, living with a series of English and Irish women, fathering at least five children with them, and nominally converting to Christianity (although, he reportedly said, "so I turned Christian. I do not know what it means, but I am a Christian, and have been for many years" [quoted in Halliday 1862, p 424]). Despite having thus settled in London for years, earning by interpreting for other Indians, begging from Britons, and doing odd jobs, British attitudes toward him radically changed during the fighting of 1857: "After the mutiny...I did very badly. No one would look at a poor Indian then – much less give to him... All that knew me used to chaff me about it, and call me Johnny Sepoy" [quoted in Halliday 1862, p 425].

At the same time, London journals like *The City Mission Magazine* (August 1857) articulated British fears about promiscuous intercourse between Asian men and British women, especially the community of the Oriental Quarter:

Men of all colours, and half a score of nations, are accompanied by a host of [White] women. Many are drunk, and all are riotous; the women have sailors' hats on their heads, and sailors' belts round their waists; they are quarrelling and pulling each other about; some have been robbed, and the police are amongst them; the language uttered is such as Satan only could suggest, and the whole scene calls up in the mind of the spectator an idea of the orgies of hell [cited in Salter 1873, p 34].

Thus, Indian men of all classes in Britain faced even more difficulties during 1857.

Even more so in India, British men raged to revenge the alleged atrocities perpetrated by Indian men against British women. Azimullah was particularly singled out for opprobrium. Many British authors condemned Azimullah in particular for his relations with British women. Lord Frederick Roberts wrote in December 1857 with shock and horror on finding letters from "that fiend Azimula Khan...Such rubbish I never read, partly in French, which this scoundrel seems to have understood; how English ladies can be so infatuated. Miss...was going to marry Azimula, and I have no doubt would like to still, altho' he was the chief instigator in the Cawnpore massacres" [Roberts 1924, pp 120-21]. Later British commentators on 1857 repeated these aspersions, calling Azimullah "an accomplished

rascal of the Gil Blas, or Casanova, type" who, while in Britain, had attracted British women "like moths in candlelight, they will fly and get burned" [Keene 1883, p 69]. "Miss A's friends interfered and saved her from becoming an item in the harem of this Mahomedan polygamist... Then let us point the moral, by warning Belgravia to be careful ere she adorns the drawing-room with Asiatic guests" [Thomson 1859, pp 55-59]. This horror at the possibility of a British woman having intimate relations with an Indian man emerged as one of the most powerful tropes among British writers during and after 1857.

AFTERMATHS OF 1857

After the immediate crisis of 1857 ended, British attitudes toward Indians in Britain softened somewhat but did not completely revert to earlier modes. Subsequent British stereotypes largely rendered all "Indians" as unalterably alien, reinforced as these stereotypes were by popular understandings of Darwinian biological inheritance, pseudo-scientific social Darwinism, and the "race"-based conflicts in 1865 in Jamaica and the Maoriwars lasting until 1872 in New Zealand. Yet, the British raj policies favouring Indian princes as the "natural leaders" of India actually gained them more access to the British queen and more favourable policies from the British government. Hence, the later lives of Indians remaining or newly arrived in Britain continued to be affected by the reverberations of 1857.

One particularly salient theme in the changes caused by 1857 was that of gender relations between Britons and Indians. As we have seen, even before 1857, many Britons had already begun to regard the Oriental Quarter as an alien presence in the imperial capital. Social reformers and religious evangelicals particularly found its mixing of Indian and British cultures, peoples, and bodies to be a threat to British morality. In 1873, missionary Salter castigated the shift in London's Oriental Quarter of an English public house, the Royal Sovereign (12 Blue Gate Fields), into a haven for lascars and British lower-class women:

The skittles have long vanished, and the rough walls and roof have long ceased to echo with boisterous European voices – for Asiatics have

taken possession of it, and twenty beds are spread out for the repose of the Lascars who seek shelter [in the skittle-ground]. The jagree dust, crazy hookas, and dirty lotas give evidence of the free use made of it. But, hark! what is that uproarious shout of discordant Asiatic and European voices mingled? – the sound of excited men and women together...only a jollification and a spree these Lascars have with the [British] ladies of the neighbourhood... [Salter 1873, pp 31-32, 69].

This house was still owned by a British man in 1873, but a Goan Indian, Francis Kaudery, operated it, to Salter's dismay.

British popular authors also represented these changed gender attitudes. Prior to 1857, for example, Sir Walter Scott's *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1830), was perhaps the only popular book suggesting Indian male desire for British womanhood (and that novel highlighted a traitorous Scottish procurer of a Scottish virgin for the notorious Tipu Sultan). During and subsequent to 1857, however, such British fictional accounts of Indian men pursuing or assaulting British women, as well as "Mutiny" literature generally, became a virtual genre, continuing to today. Thus, the events of 1857 made white British womanhood into the symbol of British purity that needed protection and created British public and official hostility against Indian men in Britain as well as India.

Quite differently, later Indian and Pakistani historians have also highlighted some of the Indians who had returned from Britain to oppose the British during 1857 in India but rather as nationalist freedom fighting heroes. Basu argues Rango Bapojee "should be considered the first and pioneer Indian agitator in England" [Basu 1922, p 142]. Several authors have focused on Azimullah as a leading Indian patriot in the first war for independence [e.g., Sen 1957; Misra 1961; www.vandemataram.com/biographies/patriots/akhan.htm]. On their part, Pakistani nationalist historians have also claimed Azimullah as "the master brain who created consciousness among the Muslims and lead them to the battle field to restore their last grandure [sic] from the jaws of the great colonial power. This was the master brain of Azimullah Khan, a great personality behind the war of independence of 1857 which has left everlasting imprints on the history – in the Shape of PAKISTAN" [Lutfullah 1970, pp 6, 31, emphasis in original]. Whether they were "old patriots" or modern nationalists,

these men's direct experiences of life in Britain made them particularly aware of the global scope and force of British colonialism [c f, Bayly 1998].

Following the crisis of 1857, Indians in Britain of various classes managed to manoeuvre through these changed British attitudes toward non-whites. Indian royalty, including Dalip Singh, and two descendants of the nawab of the Carnatic, Hafiz Lodroo Islam Khan and Hyder Jung remained in Britain and eventually regained British favour as did others. Former maharaja Gholam Mahomed of Coorg spent 1857 in India but, once the fighting was over, he returned to London with his son and grandson, receiving increased pensions and benefits and savouring London's high society. Overall, the Indian princes who did not egregiously oppose the British emerged thereafter as princely pillars of raj and were often welcome in London.

Also in Britain during the crisis were middle-class Indians including Parsi scholar and merchant from Bombay, Dadabhai Naoroji, the second Indian elected to the British parliament and the 'Grand Old Man' of the Indian National Congress. Indeed, many later Indian nationalists also studied in Britain during subsequent decades, learning there about the larger patterns of British colonialism; some became nationalist political leaders – including B R Ambedkar, S C Bose, Mohandas Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghose, M A Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru, and V D Savarkar. As has been extensively studied, all these men found their experiences in high colonial Britain helped them formulate their own political and cultural nationalisms. Additionally, Indian male and female social leaders – including Behramji Malabari, Saraswati Ramabhai and Cornelia Sorabji – also engaged critically with British society, opposing British efforts to control their lives and impressions. Nor did all Indians respond the same way. Some, including Sir Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownagree, MP, remained staunch Tories.

The events of 1857 thus marked a transition in the experiences of Indians in Britain as many among them tended to bond with each other in the face of increasingly hostile British imperialism and racism against them collectively. Yet, 1857 was not an absolutely abrupt transformation. There had been precursors of these changes in both Indian and British attitudes. Many Indians there had developed a sense of class solidarity,

living as many did in the community of the Oriental Quarter or the social centres provided by Indian diplomatic delegations. Further, the perspective from Britain provided some of them with the distance to recognise the larger patterns of global colonialism, something more difficult to do from India. Overall, a sense of themselves as collectively Indian and an early patriotism developed among many despite their origins in different regions and/or religious communities. British prejudicial stereotypes were not uniform nor did they apply equally to all classes of Indians. During and after 1857, gender relations between Indian men and British women particularly changed, reflecting complex and changing patterns. Thus, the events of 1857 marked a particularly powerful moment in the larger shift in the lives of Indians in Britain, especially Indian men. Subsequent generations of Indians in Britain also lived under the shadow of 1857, although their personal experiences there varied considerably.

NOTES

- 1 A daily account of the private as well as public lives of these envoys in London is preserved in the Urdu personal diary of another Indian ambassador, Karim Khan (1839-41) 'Siyahatnama', OR 2163, BL; published in facsimile as *Siyahatnama* (ed), 'Ibadat Barelví (1982).
- 2 Broughton Papers, MSS EUR F 213/112, British Library. The copy sent to the Maharaja of Mysore fell into British hands. Foreign Political Consultations, December 29, 1849, Nos 165-67, National Archives of India.
- 3 See the Nepali diary of this visit, translated in Whelpton (1983).

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New Lamps for Old

Colonial Experiments with Vernacular Education, Pre- and Post-1857

Anu Kumar

EARLY education policy was amorphous; the company men were mainly traders, while their Indian subordinates rendered vital assistance in matters of administration. There are no sustained accounts available of the trajectory of education in 19th century India, especially in its phase of transition and as merchant capitalism gave way to imperialism. In the late 18th century, from the details available in Calcutta, indigenous schools of elementary ('pathshalas') and higher learning, where education was imparted in Bengali, Sanskrit, and also in Arabic and Persian, existed along with largely missionary-run English schools.

It was left to Calcutta's elite to organise and reform the pathshalas. This began with the setting up of the Calcutta Book Society and Calcutta School Society in 1817 and 1818, respectively [Acharya 1990]. These societies brought various schools under its purview and also introduced printed textbooks and new subjects like geography. They arranged for training of the teachers and set up five model pathshalas. These societies sought to improve the quality of education without changing its indigenous character. Of the 78,500 books printed by the Calcutta Book Society, between 1817 and 1821, 48,750 were in Bengali and only 3,500 were in English (*ibid*). The rest were in Persian, Hindustani, Sanskrit, etc. Bengali was the main medium of instruction and sometimes the only language taught (*ibid*).

By the late 18th century, English pathshalas had mushroomed in Calcutta to meet the needs of indigent English-speaking people. The first Bengali-run English school in Calcutta was set

up in 1774 – where students were charged Rs 4-16 depending on their means. More and more schools came up, for Indians as well as Anglo Indians sometimes introducing new subjects and new methods of teaching [Acharya 1990; Mazumdar 1996].

In its initial stages, English education in India was always a two-way process. David Hare was instrumental for the Calcutta School Society's model schools, especially the Arpuly school, and did much to influence their later growth. To meet the increasing demand for English education, parallel English classes were begun; but to guard against the neglect of vernacular studies, only students proficient in Bengali were granted admission to the English classes and later of receiving higher English education at the society's expense. During Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's tenure as the principal of Sanskrit College (1851-58), a condensed course in Sanskrit was introduced along with some exposure to English language and literature (Acharya). Thus, a balance was sought between the claims of English and vernacular education. Other schools such as this came up, in the so-called Anglo vernacular model. The Tatwabodhini Pathshala was set up by Debendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's father) in 1840; his aim was to develop it into a model "national school". But this, as would be seen for most schools in the Anglo vernacular tradition, did not survive. Debendranath's school was abolished in 1848. The reason was the big demand for English education, chiefly for the purposes of serving the colonial bureaucracy. By 1830, Alexander Duff had already opened his General Assembly's Institution, where English was the only medium of instruction, with five pupils. Its swift success was a victory for Duff's zealous support for English education and paved the way for Macaulay and his by now famous minute of 1835. From the towns, this trend only spread to other provinces following the sway of colonial rule.

COLONIAL EDUCATION POLICY

The colonial education policy could arguably be said to have begun with the observation made in 1792 by Charles Grant, adviser to Cornwallis, then governor general. Grant advocated spreading the light of European knowledge through the medium of the English language. Macaulay's notions, coming

some three decades later, derived much from Charles Grant. Up to the 1830s no uniform system of education existed. The function of the general committee of public instruction formed in 1823 was confined to funding and supervising government institutions. The general committee for its part was sharply divided into two groups – the Anglicists (who believed in the superiority of English and European knowledge) and the orientalists (who were keener on restoring and rejuvenating ancient knowledge and languages of the orient). But neither showed any concern for vernacular education – even the orientalists chiefly favoured Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian.

A report in 1822 of the proceedings of the parliamentary committee reveals the British government's anxiety to resolve this crisis over education policy. A majority in the committee was in favour of English education, with only James Mill recommending the translation of European books into Indian languages. The majority opinion prevailed and Macaulay was made the president of the general committee in 1834. His historic minute was issued on February 2, 1835.

A decade before this, in 1823, the general committee for public instruction had asked the local committees in Agra, Delhi and other north Indian towns to report on the condition of education within their province and to propose measures to raise standards. For Delhi, the picture was dismal. Although there were some madrasas, as the foundation and endowment of educational institutions was perceived as a good deed by pious Muslims, the number of students was small, as compared to the city's inhabitants. Attendance was tardy and quality of teaching was poor. The government sanctioned a grant of Rs 600 per month "for the instruction of Muhammadan youth" in Delhi and thus, the Delhi College began its existence. It commenced teaching in the Ghaziu'd-Din madrasa barely two years later [Pernau 2006].

Macaulay's minute of 1835 that enshrined English as the principle medium for effecting the progressive "westernisation" of "Indian" cultures and subjectivities and Charles Wood's despatch of 1854 are generally held as the two major milestones of colonial educational policy. Wood's despatch stressed the educational responsibility of the state and envisioned a complete and integrated system comprising primary, secondary and

collegiate education. Oriental literature, it proposed, should not be neglected but European language should be cultivated. English should be the medium of higher studies for the few and the vernacular at a lower level for the many. Wood's despatch and subsequent state directives on educational policy urged the restriction of state investment to higher education and the upper classes (classes that upheld British interests) for they would purportedly disseminate "European knowledge" to the masses. Such a differential construction of the curriculum at the school and university level has been described as "functionalist" [Gauri Vishwanathan cited in Goswami 2004]. A system of "grants-in-aid" was also proposed to encourage vernacular education.

English medium instruction was the exclusive provenance of the first universities established in 1857. The universities established were based on the model of London University – not in teaching but examining and conferring degrees – and also for affiliated colleges of different kinds (*ibid*). The entrance examination and college teaching were conducted in English. In colleges, the vernacular soon came to be excluded from the first arts (FA) and BA courses in 1864. The Hindu College set the pattern in this respect. English not only had pride of place in the curriculum but overshadowed every other subject.

A process of downward filtration extended this English bias to school education as well, in spite of Wood's despatch. The model pathshallas of the Calcutta School Society for instance, became model primary schools – a component of the uniform system – where education was imparted in English as it was envisaged by the government. Like the indigenous elementary schools, vernacular missionary schools also turned into English schools or died away. The Bengal Auxiliary Missionary Society gave the reason when it discontinued every vernacular society school, except one in Krishnapur – "the desire to obtain knowledge of the English language has been so great that a school in which this was not taught was sure to dwindle away" [Acharya 1990].

This article is a preliminary examination that looks at two institutions in the vernacular medium – in Delhi and the North West Provinces (NWP) that had their beginnings in the early stages of the colonial encounter. It was a time when experimentation was new and coexisted with the urge to understand, but

experiments such as these had an untimely end, hastened arguably by the events of 1857 that led to a shift of priorities and the changing imperatives of empire.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON EDUCATION

In the NWP, educational policies were also influenced by the crisis of the Indian political system, brought on by the gradual, at times sudden, changes in society and economy.

In the early 19th century, the intermediate economy still flourished. As Chris Bayly (1998) explains, the company's revenue policy was relatively indulgent to the notables in the NWP whose pomp and display helped generate employment and sustain an intermediate economy based on military, artisan and transport services. From the 1830s a disruption set in of demand at both luxury and intermediate levels of the economy. The result of a complex set of changes were:

(i) The Gangetic area and the western areas suffered a depression deriving from the problems of liquidity. The acreage under cash crops, especially indigo, had been at artificially high levels for this served as a channel of remittance for Indian profits and salaries to Britain. The collapse of some European agency houses in 1827-28 disrupted the flow of cash and credit that affected the export sector and internal trade also.

(ii) British standardisation of the economy affected the local taxation, local mints and "idle consumption" that had been the hallmark of the small kingdoms and principalities besides enticing away the mercantile capital that supported them.

(iii) Between 1803 and 1830, there was also a substantial increase in the real revenue collected that reduced the disposable income of the rich zamindars and cut off the large variety of perquisites, which actually sustained the artisan economy [Bayly 1998].

(iv) The anti-talukdar settlements of Thomason and Bird also deprived the little kings of the locality of a large proportion of their revenue-engaging rights and put in their stead a variety of village magnates who were perceived as "ancient owners of the soil". The settlements (as Charles Metcalfe cited in Bayly (1998), p 264 says) did substantially alter the social map of the Gangetic valley and its western tracts. The landlords and large owners of

Agra, Etawah and Mainpuri districts were permanently weakened. Over a period of 20 years, many notables spent large sums in fighting law suits. Some permanently lost a large part of their income. Besides the increase in revenue, a large number of old princely families (in Benares and Farukkabad) were pensioned off on allowances or fixed stipends. Within a generation, they had been minutely subdivided, among numerous descendants. By the 1830s, most of the government pensions were paid directly to mercantile creditors of the landed aristocracy. In the short run no prosperous or viable village landlord element emerged to fill the landlords' local economic and social role (*ibid*).

Eighteen Fiftyseven then appears to have been a belated response to the many political changes that gathered apace after 1825, that shook dignities and livelihoods throughout north India, without providing in turn the foundations of a strong new system as had emerged in Bengal and Punjab.

DELHI COLLEGE

The Delhi College in its heyday 1840s-1860s symbolised an encounter between British and Indo-Muslim culture through the medium of Urdu. In the first half of the 19th century, there were already attempts in several madrassas in Delhi to reinterpret classical received knowledge and traditions. Endeavours to translate knowledge into a medium meaningful for the new circumstances had begun well before the British established their political and cultural supremacy over north India in the early 19th century.

The college contributed to the development of Urdu prose, was a nursery of science teaching, and served as a catalyst for major works on scientific subjects. Through its vernacular translation society, it mediated between eastern and western cultures, contributing to building an Urdu-speaking and reading public from different religious persuasions [Pernau 2006]. With its changes in the traditional academic curriculum, it also fostered a climate of liberal thought and the rational spirit.

The move to support the Delhi College, that came about in 1825 following the report of the general committee was a traditional gesture of patronage. But within a decade, this was translated into an altogether different idiom. In 1828, the English

branch of the Delhi College commenced with a new course of study in English language, literature and modern European sciences. It offered a space where ambitious Indian students to “anglicise” in pursuit of advancement through service to the British. The older oriental branch continued to exist in which Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit were taught along with geography, mathematics and the sciences.

The setting up of the Delhi English College took place in the context of a new understanding – the British were trying to make sense of the country they had conquered and its culture. On the other hand, the conquered hoped to reinterpret the new learning in their own language and cultural framework. Translation stood at the centre of the Delhi College’s activities – most obviously in the Vernacular Translation Society. “The translations of the Delhi College translators show their cultural assumptions, their selections and choices and their reinterpretation of the British texts they imported into the Urdu language – they too did have an agenda of change, which they wanted to induce through translation” [ibid, p 18]. Men like master Ram Chandra, the science teacher and Maulvi Zakaullah, the historian and textbook writer, fearlessly set out to discover new knowledge and in the process, hoped to rejuvenate their own culture, guided and helped by a colonial power that in the beginning at least, was not yet intent on replacing oriental languages with English.

Margrit Pernau cites successive reports of the Delhi Gazette (D G) to bring this out. On April 25, 1838 the D G wrote that unlike in Bengal, in Delhi the debate on “native education” did not oppose the defenders of oriental and western knowledge so much as those who wanted to transmit the values of the west through English and those who claimed that the “paramount object (should be) to make the improvement and cultivation of the vernacular tongue go hand in hand with the promulgation of the thoughts and ideas, the solidity of reasoning and freedom of enquiry of the European world”. Teaching through Urdu, the argument ran, offered the possibility of impacting the Indian mind to an extent (and at a price!) which English could not even begin to. It was not an appreciation for the beauty of the Urdu language and patronage for oriental learning that stood at the centre of the reform of Delhi College, but the belief that by

inducing scholars to prepare translations, printing them, and introducing them into the schools, they would "gradually set the native mind in motion and open an era of intellectual activity such as India has never witnessed" (D G, December 10, 1842).

The situation changed from the 1830s onwards. This was not mainly because of policy debates on education, but also of the changing role of the British themselves, as they moved from being diplomats to administrators. In education, some of the imperatives of the new era manifested themselves.

As a member of the committee of public instruction, Charles Trevelyan strongly advocated in 1834, the abandonment of Persian language education and also the mandatory use of the Roman alphabet for all Indian languages. He stood as the central supporter in the overall drive for Anglicisation, that most starkly manifested itself in Macaulay's famous minute, only a year later. From the 1830s members of the Delhi College committee headed by the same Charles Trevelyan also argued strenuously that only inter-communal education from "the pure fount of English literature" would enable India to make "headway against the impenetrable barrier of habit and prejudice backed by religious feeling" [Fisher 2006].

The Delhi College's English courses initiated in 1828 on an experimental basis, struggled for educational material and other resources in its first years. The English courses had begun with "a few old fashioned English spelling books with difficulty procured from the neighbouring British stations". But the college committee's grand plan began with the elite of Delhi and hoped to effect the complete uplift and reformation of the "uneducated and half-barbarous people" of India generally. This plan once effected would form the basis of an India-wide new model educational system of preparatory schools in every district and a network of regional colleges. The committee envisioned [ibid 2006]:

Christian, Mohammedan and Hindu boys of every shade of colour, and variety of descent...standing side by side in the same class, engaged in the common pursuit of English literature, contending for the same honours, and forced to acknowledge the existence of superior merit in their comrades of the lowest as well as in those of the highest caste. This is a great point gained. The artificial institution of caste cannot long survive the period when the youth of India instead of being trained to

observe it, shall be led by the daily habit of their lives to disregard it. All we have to do is to bring them together, to impress the same character on them, and to leave the yielding and affectionate mind of youth to its natural impulse. Habits of friendly communication will thus be established between all classes, they will insensibly become one people, and the process of enlightening our subjects will proceed simultaneously, with that of uniting them among themselves (Statement made in 1828 by Charles Trevelyan cited in Hasan 2006).

The college committee thus diverted funds from a Rs 1,70,000 endowment given by Nawab E'timadu'd-Daula of Awadh against the repeated protests of its donor who desired its use for traditional Persian and Arabic study. This money enabled the Delhi College to expand the experimental courses in English "for the formation of a separate institution on an enlarged scale, devoted to affording tuition in the English language, sciences and literature". It now became known as the Delhi Institute or the Delhi English Institution. Politically too, the situation was changing. As the British population, notably the army, increased in Delhi, they were no longer willing or able to integrate with the local population. The less they thought they had to learn from the orient, the more, however, the colonial officers found to teach [Dalrymple 2006]. The abolition of Persian as the official language of British rule in 1837 was followed by the decision of the Delhi residency to henceforth accept letters and petitions from their Indian allies only in English.

Transformed power relations permitted the colonial power to give way to new sensibilities and policies. "In the Delhi territory, rule by alliances was now replaced by rule by records – the supporters, the British now needed, were no longer the commanders of detachments of horses but those able to wield the pen in their service, no longer nobles, but members of middling groups who hoped to gain social status by serving the British" [Pernau 2006]. All this had an impact on the continued metamorphosis seen in the English branch of the Delhi College.

In 1842, the two branches of the college, the English and the oriental moved under the same roof, in the former residence of the British resident and once the library of Dara Shikoh. At the same time, the curricula of the two branches were integrated, the emphasis being on "useful knowledge" – natural sciences, mathematics, natural philosophy, economics, morals and history.

The medium of instruction would be English at the Delhi Institute and Urdu at the Delhi College, which at the same time would continue the teaching of the classical Arabic and Persian books.

In the Persian and Arabic classes, the stress was on mastering the languages, law and the principles of jurisprudence and a bit of philosophy and logic. The classical books were after a while replaced by works of literature – such as *Arabian Nights* and the *Kalila Dimna*, a development that struck at the heart of the traditional concept of knowledge. Though much of the old curriculum was retained, the orientation towards religion and the intimate link that held the different fields of knowledge together was broken. It was a move that coincided with the religious disputations then taking place between adherents of different reformist Muslim schools of thought in Delhi [Hasan 2006].

At the oriental branch, however, translation and adaptation work of books in English continued. The list of books translated included algebra, geometry to revenue laws and MaNaughten's principles of Islamic criminal law, from English history to Smith's *Moral Sentiments* and from books on hydraulics to treatises on polarisation of light, a total of almost 130 books in the short span of 15 years between the reform of the college and the outbreak of the revolt (*ibid*).

The alumni of the branch were trained to become translators, whose familiarity with both cultures meant they would “use their knowledge of western scholarship to rethink and transform the canonic knowledge of the east and thus bring together both worlds”. But it was a skewed process. After the changes (in curricula and focus) from 1835 onwards, Hindus always constituted about two-thirds of the student population, whereas the original aim in 1825 had been to assist Muhammedan youth in their education. It appears probable that the college was frequented more by those who profited from the upheaval brought about by the colonial power and for whom a career in the British service provided a means to upward social mobility. In 1854, it had 333 students, of whom 112 were Muslims.

More than the elite of Delhi, the college relied on colonial funding and patronage to survive. In the standards of the traditional learned circles of Delhi, and even with regard to

the other north Indian colleges, the Delhi College did not compare favourably and James Thomason as lieutenant governor of the NWP had to fight a hard battle with the committee for public instruction in Calcutta in order to have examination standards for scholarships lowered for Delhi and Agra for no student would then have a chance to secure a scholarship.

In 1857, when the revolt reached Delhi in May, the college was attacked, its rich collection of manuscripts burnt down, and the principal was killed. A revival occurred in 1864 and lasted till 1877 but it was short-lived. Suspicions between the new rulers and Delhi's old, largely Muslim elite, were too deep now to be ever bridged. The impact of the new learning engendered by the Delhi College was also short-lived and in the long run, much less far-reaching. Although the college blazed a trail in initiating a dual system of education, its merger with Lahore's Government College in April 1877, brought to an end the dream of its founders. "The flowering of science came to a standstill, while the liberal and rational spirit was overtaken by strident communitarian aspirations" [Hasan 2006; Pernau 2006]. Once Urdu, a major catalyst for Delhi's cultural and intellectual regeneration had ceased to be the medium of instruction or communication, its demise was only hastened.

The influence of its ideas was disappointingly small in relation to its possibilities. In Delhi, a great expansion of the scientific domain did not take place. It remained confined to the pages of Saiyyad Ahmed's *Tahzibu'l-akhlag* or the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*. People like Zaka Ullah and Nazir Ahmed vanished into the mist. Zaka Ullah represented what was once the Delhi's multicultural and multireligious society. In Andrews' biography, he used Zaka Ullah to fortify the era's secular ideologies that were assailed by Hindu and Muslim revitalisation movements [Hasan, introduction to Andrews 2003].

HUME'S INITIATIVES IN EDUCATION (1856-1867)

Allan Octavian (AO) Hume's experiments in vernacular education were preceded by the pioneering initiatives taken by James Thomason when the latter was the governor of NWP (1843-53). In 1849, the modern vernacular educational system began with funding the creation of 'tahsili' schools in eight

districts of the north-west provinces that included Etawah. Thomason also supported the creation of modern village primary schools, where teaching was provided in the vernaculars and funded by voluntary tax contributions of local zamindars. Such schools began haltingly in Mathura in 1851 and in 1853, in Mainpuri and Etawah. These village primary schools were organised to serve groups of several villages and were called 'halkabandi schools'.

In early 1856, when A O Hume became district magistrate for Etawah, the educational system was far from satisfactory. With an estimated population of over 5,50,000, the district had seven government-supported tahsili schools (400 pupils) and 77 traditional indigenous schools with twice the number of students. The experiment in funding village primary schools (halkabandi schools) was evidently failing, as the voluntary funding principle was ignored and zamindars were forced to provide contributions [for details, see Mehrotra and Moulton 2004].

Hume had no complaints against the tahsili schools but his attitude towards the indigenous schools where education was provided in Arabic and Persian, was decidedly negative. He characterised such an education as "generally most objectionable" and complained about the "lascivious stories" being imparted through Persian or Arabic. Modern education to him was also the very antithesis of these indigenous schools, and Hume was critical of the secretary of state for India for still wanting to utilise them.

Over these hedge schools and masters, no sort of control can be exercised; we cannot prescribe the course of studies in the former, nor can we furnish the latter when they are found wanting or permanently reward them when they excel. These masters are, too many of them, of doubtful character and extreme ignorance...able to teach most of their scholars only an imperfect smattering of Indian Persian or execrable Sanskrit, through the medium not infrequently of stories so indecent, that no English gentleman can hear him without a blush (*ibid*).

Hume's efforts to rejuvenate the vernacular school system meant that by early 1856, 32 new vernacular schools had been established in Etawah pargana. By the beginning of 1857, a total of 181 modern vernacular schools had been established with an enrolment of some 5,000 pupils. The foundation of the central

anglo-vernacular school in Etawah was laid in August 1, 1856, which was also locally funded and had some 100 scholars by the end of the year. Hume organised a scholarship scheme to enable 12 scholars, eight from halkabandi, tahsili and indigenous schools in the mufassal and four from Etawah town to complete their education at the central school. He also established a public library. He hoped the libraries would serve the needs of the local schools and also help improve the education of patwaris.

HUME'S METHODS

In 1856, Lakshman Singh (the tahsildar serving under Hume) led Hume's efforts in persuading the more prominent zamindars to support a second attempt towards rejuvenating the halkabandi school system. In keeping with the government guidelines, the local funding was equivalent to 1 per cent of the amount which the zamindars paid annually in land revenue. The involvement of Indian leaders in the establishment and management of schools was part of the overall promotion of the official plan, overseen by Lakshman Singh and Hume.

Hume also devoted much attention to improving the education of the patwaris and to enhancing the accuracy and efficient maintenance of their records. Hume believed that the welfare of the agricultural population depended on the ability and integrity of the patwari, i e, the local officials responsible for records relating to landholdings, revenue and rental payments as well as for the maintenance of accounts and statistics. The libraries he helped establish, Hume hoped, would in turn, enable the elevation of the public mind and help advance "the cause of civilisation" in Etawah. In ensuring the well-being and support of the landed proprietors, Hume believed in the comparative lightness of the land revenue. Etawah, during the revolt, witnessed two major battles and the district was also close to the heart of some of the bitterest fighting in the entire revolt. But Hume retained the support of practically all his Indian officials and most of the influential zamindars. After hostilities had declined, Hume also argued for and made substantial remissions of land revenue. In his reports after the revolt, Hume expressed the view that the comparative "lightness" of land

revenue assessment in Etawah district coupled with the more typical Anglo-Indian nostrums for governance, (had) assured the people's loyalty to the regime, with the exception of Dalelnagar Pargana where landed proprietors were reduced to indebtedness partly because of an overassessment of land revenue by the raj. "It is still to our own, mistakes our own want of foresight and appreciation of the native character and not to any special depravity of the people that the impartial historian will attribute the rebellion" [Hume in Mehrotra and Moulton *ibid*].

The experience of the rebellion made Hume more certain than ever of the urgency of extending and strengthening modern education. After all, he surmised, those Indians exposed to British introduced modern education had overwhelmingly supported the government during the disturbances. He believed there was a direct connection between Etawah's recent "pre-eminent" development in elementary education and its evident loyalty during the rebellion. For Hume, the widespread dissemination of modern elementary education attuned to the socio-economic needs of an overwhelmingly agrarian district not noted for high levels of educational or cultural attainment, was the key to the people's and the country's moral advancement.

Give the rajputs and other fighting men reasonable means and happy homes, free from those instruments of torture, the civil courts and the native usurer, and they will fight for order and the government under whom they are well off. Make it easier for your gujjar, ahir and thief classes to grow rich by agriculture than crime and besides making criminal administration cheaper, most of these for their own sake will side with the government. Tax the baniahs, bankers who growing rich by the pen, oust their betters from their ancestral holdings, and then are too great cowards to wield a sword, either to protect their own acquisitions or aid the government that fostered their success (*ibid*).

As the rebellion waned, Hume encountered problems over the reimbursement by the government of certain items in the district treasury that had been looted during the disturbances. In August 1859, the government sanctioned the reimbursement of most claims submitted by Hume, but declined to repay funds raised by public subscription for education and public libraries. In September 2, Hume expressed his hurt at the government's refusal to refund funds first obtained by inviting subscriptions to

the public funds. He believed such funds for elementary schools were more vital than colleges.

The foundation of any healthy and comprehensive scheme of education must be laid amongst the masses, let but the root pierce deeply and spread widely through soil judiciously loosened and leaf, flower and fruit will burst out and bloom spontaneously in one season. Hitherto our great colleges have yielded little but disappointment...rootless hot house nurselings! Indian education, like French liberty and possibly from analogous causes, has ever been more of as show than a reality; in our haste for results we have ignored the means, we have tried the great Indian trick of developing in a single hour, the shoot, the plant, the flower and fruit and found alas! That we at least were no conjurors. First and foremost then I would entirely reverse the current practice, I would care less about the stately universities, empty halls of learning yet unborn, while I would devote our chief care, our last energies to sowing thickly, and widely through the land, good elementary schools for the people" [Hume, *ibid*].

Moreover, while he acknowledged the importance of the government's role in education, Hume went out of his way to emphasise the crucial significance of directly involving an Indian popular element in the process. Failure to involve the people in the development of modern education had been the source, he believed, of the "misapprehension" which had existed in some places over the government's intentions. Hume's concern over the involvement of the popular element also influenced his view that taxes, that were to be raised locally for new village and town schools, must be voluntary rather than compulsory.

In his report of September 2, 1859 to the education department, Hume outlined his philosophy of education. It was a system that provided for three basic categories of schools, village, town and central; school buildings needed to be sited in good substantial structures. He stressed the importance of kindred institutions, namely, public libraries and in the case of the central Anglo-vernacular school, a reading room and a museum intended primarily to illustrate the botany, natural history and industrial products of the province; a printing press was also a necessary adjunct to the educational establishment. The system of school management was one in which the practical control of district schools needed to be vested primarily in the

district officer with the education department being responsible only for regular inspections designed to "test progress and see that the rules in force" were observed. Colleges funded by the state, controlled by the education department would be established in each administrative division. Training of teachers needed to be provided for at each divisional college and scholarships to support really clever pupils from the village school to the university.

Hume noted that as a result of the modern education initiatives of 1856, more than 7,000 students had been attending schools in May 1857, just prior to the outbreak of the rebellion. He reported in January 1858 that in 31 schools, teachers had remained throughout the disturbance at their posts. As regards the halkabandi schools, Hume provided figures between numbers of institutions, enrolment figures and levels of funding from the 1 per cent tax before and after the rebellion. By January 1859, the system had largely recovered except in student registrations which were 4,374 compared with 5,186 two years earlier. In the six years since he restarted the halkabandi schools in 1856, the people had voluntarily contributed Rs 72,000 in school taxes and more than Rs 50,000 in labour, land, materials and money, for school buildings, fittings, etc.

Post-revolt, Hume devoted great attention on reviving the central school that was at the apex of the new education system he envisioned for the district. It was a "stepping stone" for the best students of the halkabandi and tahsili schools to the "Agra College" and thus designed to put within the reach of every talented lad, however poor, the attainment of a first rate education. After the rebellion, the management of the school was transferred to a local committee (of local residents, elected to a certain extent by the parents of the pupils). The committee within the first six months of its operation raised the number of pupils from 70 to 250. Hume was seeking to introduce a limited but practical measure of self-government in the area of education and hoped thereby to strengthen support for modern elementary education within the Indian community. By January 1861, enrolment at the school had risen to 282 students and the curriculum in true Anglo-vernacular tradition consisted of courses in English, Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, mathematics, surveying, geography, history and natural science.

CONFLICT WITH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

As the education department became more centralised, however, it did not welcome Hume's educational initiatives. The role of the district officer too changed – the officer was a vital adjunct of the colonial administration, and education was left to the purview of the education department. Hume also admitted the fundamental philosophic differences that existed between him and the educational department over the appropriate curriculum for the village schools but he argued education had to suit the probable career of the student, and the overwhelmingly majority in an agricultural district such as Etawah did not need to learn "cube root in decimals" or other more advanced subjects promoted by the education department.

In 1862, management of the central school that had been vested in the local committee was placed under the control of the education department; The system of self-government Hume had laboured to initiate was abandoned. Post-1862 saw a centralised department control over the entire education scheme of the district. In an official communication of September 1865, Hume insisted that real popular education would not be realised until the government gave it a top priority and made its propagation a prime responsibility of district officers.

Hume had also started a printing press for books for the halkabandi schools, which was disrupted on account of the revolt of 1857. In 1863, the government's decision to centralise all official printing at the government press threatened the existence of the Etawah educational press that published the occasional journal *People's Friend* sent to all schools in the district and also zamindars and patwaris.

It soon became evident that when the elements of local involvement and support that had characterised Hume's educational system were lost, there was a gradual decline both in the number of schools and of students being educated in the district. This was also demonstrated in later annual reports on education in Etawah from 1863-64 to 1865-66.

In 1863-64, Etawah had 142 halkabandi schools with 3,958 students and six tahsili schools with an average enrolment of 86 students for a total of 516. In the next two years, tahsili schools

had ceased to form a separate administrative category, in Etawah at least, for data gathering purposes, and statistics were available only for halkabandi schools. The halkabandi schools in 1864-65 numbered 137 with 3,597 students and in 1865-66, there were 133 schools and 3,531 students. A significant decline from 1861 when Hume reported that there were 185 schools (including seven tahsili) and some 8,700 students. The Etawah central school had fared better and grown from 282 students in 1861 to an average of 377 by early 1867. Hume obviously had a sound point when he emphasised the importance of involving the people and officials of the district in the overall development of modern education.

POST-1857

The constraints imposed by centralisation and the ideology of empire meant an expansion as well as a changing role for the bureaucracy. The district officer's role became largely administrative, and especially involved an oversight of revenue administration. The education department for every province was in turn responsible for educational initiatives. The emphasis on recruiting bureaucrats to serve the empire meant the stress on university education, and English and law were the most sought after subjects in colleges and at the university level.

At the ground level, an honoured place in the new educational curriculum accrued to land measurement and registration, but the old had now to give place to the new. Revenue administration, a critical factor in reasons for the revolt, constituted an important aspect of the empire's new focus. In 1870, the establishment of revenue, agriculture and commerce at regional levels signalled the restructuring of land revenue bureaucracies as well as the beginning of a new round of rationalisation of systems of revenue settlement [Goswami 2004; Barrow 2003]. New techniques for rationalised mapping of land and revenue assessments spawned a "revolution" in the everyday operations of land surveys and settlement. The central organising principle of revenue assessment was based on a mathematically derived average rental rate determined by soil types. It displaced older systems recorded by the patwaris and especially the 'nikasi' – the roll of cultivators. The nikasi

embedded within local complex social structures and agrarian practices reflected the reciprocal structure of dues and claims that defined the locally specific relations between landlords and peasants. Maps too came into increased circulation [Barrow ibid].

The education of the “masses” secured through vernacular education at the primary and secondary school level was oriented towards useful, practical knowledge. A crucial element in the restructuring of the educational curriculum was the centrality accorded to a vocational variant of “European” sciences. An official directive from the mid-1850s titled “reports on educational books in the vernacular” laid out the broad pattern of the educational curriculum of vernacular medium schools especially with regard to the “communication of European knowledge and science” [Goswami op cit].

This meant the decline and gradual oblivion of the use of Persian and Arabic as a medium of instruction. Already these languages had come under sustained criticism, as seen in Hume’s reactions to the school textbooks used. Even Nazir Ahmed at the Delhi College found many of the texts which were a part of the traditional curriculum especially of Persian objectionable. For instance, *Gulistan* that constituted one of the core texts for Muslim education was removed from the curriculum as its contents in no way were related to the context of children’s lives.

A massive programme commenced for the translation of English works into vernacular languages. The focus on translation was premised on the assumption that the “thinking native public are a small minority, but they are a most potent minority, and a minority for the most part, essentially hostile to European science and literature, as well to Europeans and their governments” [Goswami 2004]. Educated native men were encouraged to write original works connected with the country, its history, productions, resources and geography, a subject which was growing in importance. The post-1857 colonial regime also reversed the earlier latitude towards indigenously produced works. From now on as it sought to develop the native mind, there would officially commissioned and subsidised works, financial grants were extended to government supported presses and there followed the incorporation of select local officials to

the school book committees overseeing production of textbooks that were instituted in the late 1860s.

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History as Revenge and Retaliation

Rereading Savarkar's *The War of Independence of 1857*

Jyotirmaya Sharma

THE first step in any contemporary reading of Savarkar's account of 1857 ought to be the title of the book itself. It is often cited as *The First War of Indian Independence – 1857*. By all accounts, the insertion of the word "first" is a later interpolation. The *Savarkar Samagra*¹ mentions it as *Atthharahasau Sattavan Ka Svatantrata Sangram* (*The War of Independence of 1857*). The Marathi title is *Atthharahasau Sattavanche Swatantrya Samar*. Vasanth Krishna Varad Pande, a Savarkar admirer, calls it *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*.² Writing about Savarkar's years in London, Harindra Srivastava³ gives a detailed account of the years leading to the publication of Savarkar's history of 1857, and clearly mentions the title as *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*. In the case of Varad Pande and Srivastava, the word "Indian" has been added to the title. Dhananjaya Keer,⁴ author of a hagiographical biography of Savarkar cites the title on p 67 as *The First Indian War of Independence – 1857*, but mentions it as *The War of Independence of 1857* on page 74. Going by the original title, cited in the Marathi and Hindi versions of the *Savarkar Samagra*, it is safe to assume that the title is *The War of Independence of 1857*.

Another important next step before considering Savarkar's history of 1857 is to read an important essay by Savarkar titled 'Hindu Sangathankarta Swarashtra Ka Itihaas Kis Tarah Likhein Aur Padhein'⁵ ('How Those Working for Hindu Consolidation Ought to Write and Read the History of Their Own Nation'). Savarkar begins by arguing that for the existence of the Hindu Rashtra, the present ought to be made formidable and powerful.

In doing so, the knowledge of the past was extremely crucial. The history of the Hindus, however, was one of the emergence of 'Bharatiya sanskriti' through the process of weaving together all diversities, differences and pluralities into the sense of national unity.

But reading Hindu history for Savarkar was also the history of foreign aggression and influences and the way in which these were fought and absorbed into the Hindu cultural and civilisational matrix. The early part of this story was one of the triumph of Hindu civilisation to overwhelm these foreign invasions and influences. The case of the subsequent Muslim invasions was a different one altogether. It is a narrative, argues Savarkar, of struggle against Muslims and the eventual defeat of the Muslim rule at the hands of Chhatrapati Shivaji, who established a Hindu-Padpadshahi or Hindu Empire as a result.

For Savarkar, history was, then, to be written in two different ways. There was to be a history of the Hindu nation and there was to be a history of the encounter of the Hindu nation with Muslims. While he exhorts history writers of the Hindu nation to be objective and truthful, to write honestly about moments in history that were flawed, and do so factually, he goes on to set a different set of rules for writing the history of the Hindus and their nation. In a national sense, the differences between Aryans and non-Aryans, Brahmin or Shudra, Vaidik or avaidik, Kaayasta or Dravid, Jain or Baudhha, Shaiva or Vaishnava were to Savarkar superfluous. What mattered in the final analysis was that "our collective lives can be described only by one word. That unique word is Hindu".⁶ While history for Savarkar was a mixture of the glories and of embarrassing and uncomfortable moments, it ought not to be divided into Aryan and non-Aryan history. Rather, it ought to be written as the history of the Hindu Rashtra.

Savarkar's methodology for writing Hindu history, therefore, consists of the following trajectory. Hindu historians must not ignore, for instance, the conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism, the instance of Jains resorting to arms in order to defend themselves, the schism between Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Yet, these instances of conflict and differences ought to be read as the history of the "entire Hindu race, united and consolidated as one entity".⁷ Instances in the past of differences and conflicts,

suggests Savarkar, ought now to be presented as the common and shared social history of the Hindus.

At the beginning of this essay, Savarkar had argued for a proper study of the past in order to strengthen and consolidate the present. But in delineating the manner in which the history of the unified Hindu nation ought to be written, Savarkar introduces a new element. He says:

Whatever has happened in the past has been written [in Hindu history] factually and objectively. The answers to what ought to be today cannot be given by the past. These answers have to be searched in the present.⁸

Not only did “objective” Hindu history have very little to contribute to the present, but the contemporary Hindu historian of Savarkar’s conception also had to follow certain rules regarding his reading of the Hindu past:

The past ought not to be criticised through the bifocals of the present. Whatever unique events happened in a particular period were the result of a different society and a different situation.⁹

Hindu history, concludes Savarkar, was the story of the emergence of a nation called Hindustan, an amalgamation of various regions and sub-nationalities. It was the indivisible Akhand Bharat. Hindu history, therefore, was the history of all nationalities and identities coming together in one single organic unity.

For Savarkar, there was another “laughable example of history writing that hides the nature of truth”.¹⁰ Congressmen who followed the “crazed world view and orientation of Gandhiji” wrote this history.¹¹ This history overlooked the cruelties inflicted on Hindus by Muslim rulers like Aurangzeb and Allaudin Khilji, to mention a few. Savarkar finds no mention in this form of history of religious persecution perpetrated by the Muslims; on the contrary, he finds this history full of praise for Islam, Muslim rule and civilisation. He is irate at the neglect of “the truth that there was a centuries old fight unto death between Hindu and Muslim religions, and Hindu and Muslim nations, and that finally, Hindus destroyed Muslim rule and broke it into pieces.”¹² Only the Hindu nation withstood the assault of the Muslims, asserts Savarkar, and prevented their “poisonous attack”.¹³ The only way Hindus and Muslims can co-exist

without the past casting a shadow is by the Muslims acknowledging Hindu strength and supremacy.

SWADHARMA AND SWARAJYA

When Savarkar's *The War of Independence of 1857* was published in 1909 (he began writing it in 1907), the "crazed" world view of Gandhi and his followers, as Savarkar had characterised it, had still not been sufficiently formulated. In fact, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* was published the same year. The two had earlier met in India House in London in 1906. Pandit Parmanand,¹⁴ who knew both Savarkar and Gandhi narrates a story about Gandhi's meeting with Savarkar at the India House in London. Gandhi had dropped in while Savarkar was frying prawns. Gandhi raised a political issue. Savarkar cut him short and instead invited him to have dinner. Gandhi said he was a vegetarian. To which Savarkar retorted that if Gandhi was unable to eat with him, how was he going to work alongside him. Savarkar, then, went on to say he was looking for people who were ready to eat the Britishers alive, and not baulk at eating fish.

Savarkar's account of 1857 is replete with instances of "white flesh" being slaughtered. It is a theme that is a constant refrain throughout the text. It is important to note that Savarkar's politics was one that divided the world between "friend" and "foe". It was not material who the "foe" was as long as an enemy could be found at all times. In the essay on the way Hindus ought to write the history of their nation, the enemy clearly are the Muslims. But in his narrative on 1857, the enemy were the British. In other words, Savarkar formulated his entire world view in terms of well-entrenched, non-negotiable, binary oppositions. In a rare advaitic vein – for Savarkar had little time for philosophic schools of Hinduism and was suspicious of 'advaita' – he talks of the nature of the "Self" as something that was known to itself immutably and without a name or even a form. This abstract notion of the "Self" gets transformed the moment it comes into contact or conflict with a non-self. The "Self", then, acquires a name and an identity in order to communicate with the non-self. In Savarkar's scheme of things, the more he engaged in formulating the contours of his ideal of Hindutva and

giving it a political colour, the greater was the proliferation of the non-selves. Islam and the Muslims constituted the primary definition of the non-self, but the British and Christianity, Buddha and Buddhism, Gandhi and Ahimsa were at some point or the other added to his rogue's gallery of non-selves. Often the non-self led to a redefinition of the "Self". For instance, while Savarkar's understanding of Muslims and Islam was based on a caricature, he found several elements from within this understanding "irresistible", and speaks of having "absorbed" a great deal of the non-self in order to recast the "Self".¹⁵

In a world divided between "friend" and "foe", between "us" and "them", there were no rules of morality, no ethical codes, when it came to dealing with the "enemy". The epigraph of Savarkar's *The War of Independence of 1857* is instructive. It is a quote from Swami Ramdas, Chhatrapati Shivaji's guru, which reads: "Die for the sake of Dharma, and while dieing kill all; In killing is your victory, your own rule".¹⁶ While killing was the chosen instrumentality, the essence that circumscribed Savarkar's account of 1857 was the establishment of 'swadharma' or one's own religion and 'swarajya' or self-rule. Further, Mazzini's writings and his role in the unification of Italy was the inspiration behind Savarkar's belief that every revolution ought to have an essence. It has to be pointed out that "dharma" in this instance means religion and does not have the other philosophical connotations that are also associated with the term. There is a tendency among commentators on Savarkar to misread his distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, leading often to the conclusion that Savarkar had little to do with religion.¹⁷

Savarkar argued that there was an inextricable link between swadharma and swarajya. The sages of antiquity believed in this link, and Mazzini too saw an inseparable link between heaven and earth. He further refines the link to argue that "swarajya is worthless without *swadharma*, and *swadharma* is powerless without *swarajya*".¹⁸ Once the relation between religion and self-rule had been established, the only thing that mattered was killing the British in order to approximate to the essence. The British were the "foe" in this instance. Here too, Savarkar makes no distinction between the British and Christianity. For him, India's capitulation to the British rule was an act of genuflecting before the kindness of Jesus Christ. Hindus and Muslims were

allies in 1857 against a common enemy, the British, a fact that Savarkar constantly emphasises. In the events that led to 1857, Savarkar perceives these as an instance of Hindus and Muslims dancing on the back of Christianity.¹⁹ Invoking the term jihad,²⁰ Savarkar appreciates the way in which maulvis and pandits preached jihad against the British/Christians in 1857. There is jubilation in Savarkar's account at every instance of a church being felled, a cross being smashed and every Christian being "sliced".²¹

If the imperative was to establish the supremacy of religion and attain self-rule, the pursuit of this goal sanctioned killing. Swami Ramdas' exhortation was to kill without entertaining any doubts about the question of means and ends. It was war of a different kind, bereft of the old codes and rules. In his reading of 1857, Savarkar justifies the killing of countless British women and children by taking cue from what he calls the "tactics of Maratha warfare".²² The ideal was that every sacrifice and act of valour ought to lead to success. Anything short of achieving the desired end was suicide. Therefore, Savarkar writes about the increasing rejoicing and enthusiasm of the rebels when they saw more and more English blood being spilt. In Meerut, this exultation was the result of several women and children being burnt alive after their houses were set on fire.²³ In Delhi, the rebels went like "fearsome demons" to the house of Rev Jennings, killed him, but also his young daughter and another lady guest of theirs.²⁴

On May 16, 1857, several Englishmen were killed. Savarkar goes on to describe the fate of the women and children of those who were killed:

If some woman or child pleaded for mercy, the people shouted: "Revenge for Meerut's chains, revenge for slavery, revenge for the ammunition shed". This vengeful sword then decapitated pleading head.²⁵

The rebel soldiers had "taken the terrible vow of tasting English blood, like Bheemsen had done".²⁶ No allowance was to be given even to those British men and women who had been kind-hearted. An old deputy collector was seen running, and despite some people in Jaunpur arguing that he was a good man, he was killed. Savarkar puts the following dialogue into the mouths of the rebel soldiers: "Nothing of this sort. He is a

European and he must die".²⁷ Take another instance. In Kanpur, colonel Ewart is killed. Here is how Savarkar describes the fate of his wife:

That Colonel's wife was standing close by. Some people started telling her, "You are a woman and that is why your life has been spared!" But one cruel friend of theirs shouted, "What woman! Isn't she a white woman? If so, cut her into pieces." Before that sentence finished, its terrible import had been made manifest.²⁸

As an aside Savarkar denies that a single English woman was raped despite claims to the contrary. In a sentence that would be the delight of any psychologist, Savarkar maintains that 1857 did not happen because Indians did not "get white women". It happened to eliminate the inauspicious white feet from "our home".²⁹

In June, major general Wheeler had entered into an agreement with the leader of the rebels, Nana Saheb, for safe passage of men, women and children down the Ganga in Kanpur. This is how Savarkar describes the fate they met while their boats were moving along the river. He saw this as the celebration of the anniversary of Plassey:

In the meantime, the boats started burning. English men, women and children started leaping in the Ganga. Some started swimming, some drowned, some started burning and all of them, sooner or later, were killed by bullets. Pieces of flesh, decapitated heads, strands of hair, disembodied hands, broken legs, a flood of blood. The Ganga turned red...this is how the anniversary of Plassey was celebrated!³⁰

In Jhansi, Savarkar describes a more gruesome massacre of 75 men, 12 women and 23 children in religious terms by calling it 'bali' or holy sacrifice:

Women had little children in their laps and these children were clinging on to their mothers. These women, infants and older children clinging on to their mothers were guilty of being white and were decapitated with a black sword.³¹

With every such massacre of women and children, Savarkar notes that the rebels of 1857 spilt British blood with "great relish".

More was to come. Here is Savarkar's unemotional account of what happened in Bibigadh, in Kanpur. The scene is one

where the prison guards refuse to massacre the English. Begum Saheb, the chief officer of Bibighar, which is under the rebel control, sends a message to the butcher's colony in Kanpur:

In a short while, the butchers entered Bibighar with naked swords and sharp knives in the evening and emerged out of it late in the night. Between their entering and coming out, a sea of white blood spread all over. As soon as they entered with their swords and knives, they butchered 150 women and children. A pool of blood collected there and body parts floated in it. While going in, the butchers walked on the ground and while coming out they had to journey through blood.³²

And then, this is what happened next morning:

As soon as it was morning, these poor creatures [those who were half-dead or dying] were dragged out and were pushed into a nearby well. Two children got out from under the weight of bodies and started running around the edge of the well. But they were pushed back into the well and fell over the dead.³³

Savarkar comments that the accumulated account between the two races had been squared in this manner. Further, at one point, when the English caught the rebellious soldiers, and before they were hanged, the English asked them why they had killed their women and children. The soldiers replied: "Sir, does anyone leave behind the litter of a snake after killing the snake?"³⁴

The story doesn't end here. A justification of revenge, retaliation and retribution was carefully built into Savarkar's retelling of 1857.³⁵ A massacre, he says, is a terrible thing. It happens, however, because humankind has failed to approximate the lofty ideals of natural justice, peace, parity and universal brotherhood. In this day and age, 'asatya', untruth rules over satya, truth. We can only wait for an era to dawn when truth will rule every heart. If someone in such an era were to spill blood or even utter the word 'pratishodh', revenge, he/she would automatically be considered vile, wretched and lowly. Acts of revenge in a society where ahimsa, non-violence, and justice rule would be considered sinful.

Savarkar regretted that such a divine epoch was far from being realised. Words like revolt, revolution, rebellion and revenge, therefore were legitimate in order to remove injustice and bring about parity and justice. Revolt, bloodshed and revenge were at once the instruments of injustice and of bringing

about natural justice. That is why Shivaji's claws were sacred, that is the reason Brutus' dagger was sacred and that is why the bloodshed of Italy's revolution was without blemish. Fear keeps a check on injustice. "For every Hiranyakashyapu", Savarkar quips, "a Narasimha is essential; every Duhshasana requires a Bheema".³⁵ Revenge, therefore, was the establishment of natural law and justice. From this axiom, Savarkar derived a principle of nationalism. He claimed that wherever injustice increased and nations went up in flames, wherever nationalist wars were fought, in such places revenge for injustices that the nation suffered were taken by killing the perpetrators of injustice of another nation.

Any reappraisal of 1857, therefore, is also an opportunity to evaluate the terrifying set of propositions introduced by Savarkar into the Indian political vocabulary. Even those who differ from his conception of Hindutva seem to acknowledge his nationalism, patriotism and commitment to the cause of India's freedom, often overlooking the model of retributive violence and its philosophical justification that informs much of his conception of nationalism and patriotism. Along with a critical view of Savarkar, there is also the need, therefore, to examine the content of such terms as "nationalism" and "patriotism", used frequently these days to justify inflamed states of emotion and violence in the name of abstractions.

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SEPOYS AND SOLDIERS

The Beginning of ‘People’s War’ in India

Kaushik Roy

THE 19th century witnessed the emergence of a new form of warfare. The “limited war” of the 18th century was replaced by the “people’s war” in the mid-19th century which in turn gave rise to “total war” during the first half of the 20th century.¹ The European 18th century wars were of limited liability fought without any moral or ideological issues. Eighteenth century European warfare comprised conflicts between the armies raised, equipped and fed by bureaucratised monarchies. While waging warfare, such armies made clear distinctions between the armed forces and the civilians.² However, all these restrictions were wiped away in the era of people’s war. According to Stig Forster and Jorg Nagler, it was the people’s armies that conducted the people’s war. In such armies, citizens became soldiers and the home front was also mobilised to support the war effort. As a consequence, the watertight compartmentalisation between the home front and the battlefield vanished. And public opinion asserted an important role in shaping the conduct of such wars.³ John Whiteclay Chambers II says that cultural attitudes (mentality which shaped images of the enemy) also aided the brutalisation of warfare.⁴ Soldiers were motivated more by ideology rather than cash or monetary considerations.⁵ Long before Forster and Nagler, Eric Robson said that unlike the 18th century wars, the revolutionary wars of France and the US marked the beginning of the ideological war which reached its apogee in the two world wars of the 20th century.⁶ In 1789, the French Revolution, generated the military philosophy known as “the nation in arms”. In accordance with this idea, a state with popular sovereignty was stronger than an absolutist monarchy because its people willingly contributed their blood in defence of the country they considered their

own.⁷ And this marked the rise of the people's war. It is to be noted that people's war in this context refers to interstate warfare and hence is different from the Maoist concept of people's war which involves the political mobilisation of certain classes by the communist party for conducting guerrilla and conventional warfare against the ruling classes.

The "Great Mutiny" lasted from May 10, 1857 till April 1859.⁸ In certain aspects, the fighting during this period in south Asia approximated the paradigm of a people's war. All the elements characterising a people's war were present in varying degrees in the conflagration of the mutiny. The East India Company's (henceforth EIC) wars with the indigenous powers between 1770 and 1849 were similar to the European 18th century wars. But, combat during 1857 represented a lethal increase as regards scope, intensity and impact on society. Alexander Llewellyn asserts that in 1857 both the sides aimed at the complete destruction of the enemy. Moreover, the British during 1857 fought in India with greater ruthlessness than was evident in the Crimean War of the same decade.⁹ Let us see how far the model of the people's war which has been developed by the historians in the context of European and American warfare is tenable for India during the Mutiny of 1857. Hence, this article compares and contrasts the mid-19th century military experience in south Asia with that of North America and west Europe.

PEOPLE'S WAR DURING 1857-59

Unlike in previous wars, the lives of the prisoners of war were not safeguarded either by the "rebels" or by the British. Instances of prisoners being put to death by the EIC's troops were few before 1857. But, execution of prisoners became common during the campaigns conducted between 1857 and 1859 in India. On May 20, 1857, the 55th Infantry Regiment rebelled at some distance from Peshawar, and Colonel John Nicholson attacked them. His forces killed 150 of them and captured another 100. Of these prisoners, 40 were blown away from the mouth of the guns and the rest were hanged.¹⁰ Nicholson was no exception. As the EIC's troops advanced towards Lucknow in November 1857, one British participant wrote: "During the day

when we were encamped I saw several men hanged, without trial, by the soldiers, who had been taken with arms in their hands".¹¹ On January 29, 1858, when Hugh Rose's troops belonging to the Central India Field Force occupied the fort of Rahatgarh, about 84 rebels were captured and 24 of them were executed.¹² Frequently, the rebels eliminated the prisoners. On June 8, 1857, the rebels attacked the fort of Jhansi. Around 5 pm, the British surrendered on condition that their lives will be spared. As soon as they surrendered, the prisoners were put to the sword.¹³

The distinction between combatants and non-combatants vanished in the case of people's war. Forster and Nagler claim that the Civil War in the US of 1861-65 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 witnessed the evolution of a strategy directed against the civilians. This was because the civilians were necessary to sustain the war effort and the former often also joined the people's armies. The people took up arms and were either mobilised from above or they mobilised on their own spontaneously.¹⁴ Subaltern historiography ascribes autonomy and agency to the ordinary people. The practitioners of this approach assert that popular initiative shaped the mass violence that unfolded against the alien regime in 1857.¹⁵ Rudrangshu Mukherjee goes on to say that the rebels indulged in acts of symbolic violence. Instances of popular unrest were symptoms of popular hatred and anger.¹⁶

The Confederate forces during the Civil War in the US attacked the towns and seized the cargoes held by Union sympathisers.¹⁷ Both the rebels and the EIC's soldiers attacked non-combatants and private property in an urge for revenge. For the rebels, the prime targets were the white people, their houses and business enterprises. On May 4, 1857, Archdale Wilson wrote to his wife from Meerut: "The 85 men [3rd Cavalry] who refused the cartridges are to be tried in lump, they have taken now to burning bungalows. Last night they burned an empty bungalow and that of the Q M Sergeant and some days ago a picket's stable, and one of the men's huts."¹⁸ Wilson on May 11, 1857 wrote from Meerut to his wife:

At half past six o'clock just as I had stepped into the carriage for a drive, Whish came galloping into my compound to say that both Native Regiments and the 3rd Cavalry were in a state of open mutiny and were

murdering every European they could meet.... The scoundrels in about an hour's time burnt down nearly every bungalow on the south side of the 'nullah', including the General's and Greathed's, and I am very sorry to say several officers, women, children and European soldiers have been cruelly and ruthlessly murdered. Colonel Finnis commanding 11th and Captain Taylor commanding 10th were, I believe the first who fell, besides these, Captain Macdonald, Lieutenant Macnab, Deputy Surgeon Phillips and Dawson and Mrs Tregan, Dr Christie severely wounded, Mrs Chambers... killed, Mrs. Macdonald missing, supposed to have been burnt in her house, 3 European women killed and about 9 men, 3 or 4 others wounded....¹⁹

According to the calculation of one of the British officers who fought in the 1857 Mutiny, in the North West Provinces, about one-fifth of the European inhabitants were killed by the mutineers.²⁰ In Delhi, the rebels killed the Europeans and set fire to their houses.²¹ The mutineers at Delhi destroyed the Delhi Bank where Europeans kept their money and burnt all the accounts.²² For miles around Allahabad, the houses belonging to the British were burnt and their property looted.²³ On June 5, 1857, the 37th Infantry Regiment attacked the indigo factories of the British planters and the houses of the British officers at Jaunpur.²⁴

All the symbols of state institutions were attacked. It was a deliberate and open challenge to the legitimacy of the Company Raj. On June 12, 1857 at Lucknow, the 3rd Military Police Regiment that was guarding the gaol broke into open mutiny and then marched towards Sultanpur. The insurgents burnt the cantonments and the houses belonging to the British were plundered and then gutted.²⁵ During August 1857, at Jhansi, the rebels made a public bonfire of official records.²⁶

The rebels attacked everything that stood for the "west" not only because of their symbolic values but also for the fact that they were aware of the military advantages of destroying advanced dual use technology products of the Raj. Military operations during both the 1857 Mutiny and the Civil War of the US were characterised by the use of the field telegraph.²⁷ Before the invention of the electrical telegraph, messengers on horses carried orders and instructions to their destinations.²⁸ During the second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-1805), letters written by General G Lake, campaigning in north India took about 12 days to reach the governor-general at Fort William.²⁹ Thanks to the

telegraph, the governor-general at Calcutta and his field commanders operating in north India during 1857 could communicate with each other within a matter of hours. When the British units marched, they laid down telegraph lines. On May 30, 1857, while camping at Karnal, Colonel Keith Young wrote to his wife: "The telegraph is invaluable. The signalling apparatus goes on with us this afternoon, and will be set up at our new halting place, Garunda, so that when we arrive at our ground we shall know at once what is going on at Ambala."³⁰

The rebels attacked the telegraph lines not only to harm the British but to use that technology to the best of their advantages. One British officer who fought the rebels has written:

On our entering the 'thananh' inclosure, we found evidence of the preserving ingenuity of the rebels in their having adopted a large quantity of the material of our electric telegraph lines to the present exigencies of their position. They had dug up a number of cast iron screws, in which the telegraph posts are placed, struck off the phlanges of the screws, bored touch holes in them, and were mounting them as guns on carriages. They employed the thick telegraph wire for fixing and strengthening them, besides cutting up a large portion of it into small lengths for grape.³¹

Both the rebels and the British inflicted violence on the civilians. Rose's troops attacked unarmed Indian civilians. J H Sylvester, a medical officer with the army made the following entry on October 25, 1857 in his diary:

The consequence was the men off duty and even some native soldiers but chiefly the 86th and Artillery were frightfully drunk having seized the native liquor shops. They then commenced looting and killing everything black, old men, young women and children! This of course was to be deplored but I had anticipated this. They shouted Kanpur, Delhi and down they went. [Indecipherable] says he saw a room full of dead women with children sucking at their breasts. Other women brought out dead, children supplicating for mercy.³²

When James Neill with the Madras Fusiliers marched from Benaras to Allahabad, he systematically executed 6,000 Indians. The men killed were shopkeepers, artisans, peddlers and porters. They were hanged on the branches of the tree. The favourite phrase among the white soldiers was "to bag the niggers". The objective was to frighten the people into submission and

docility. The dead bodies hanging at the market places and roads were visible symbols of British authority. When the stench became too much, the dead bodies were dumped on the carts and disposed off.³³ Neill was somewhat similar to the Union commander during the American Civil War William T Sherman whose objective was to make Georgia "howl". In 1864, when Sherman marched into the Confederacy, the civilians were forced out of their home and the cities were torched. In the American Civil War scenario, Sherman was no exception. Philip H Sheridan systematically burned the farms of Shenandoah Valley.³⁴ Back in British India, there were many figures similar to Neill. Several gibbets were constructed at Benaras where the commissioner, M R Gubbins, provided "justice" by hanging men of high castes.³⁵

The fence sitters as well as the Indian collaborators of the Raj were targets of rebel attack. Resaldar Mowla Baksh was in the Ramgar Irregular Cavalry when the rebellion broke out. He had 35 years of service behind him. During the Mutiny, he refused to join the mutineers despite threats as well as inducements from the rebels. Due to Mowla Baksh's tact and leadership, the Ramgar Irregular Cavalry stationed at Chhotanagpur remained loyal. In retaliation, the rebels burnt his house and looted his property.³⁶ Those Indians manning the non-military branches of the Company state were also attacked. When the rebels entered Delhi through the bridge of boats, they cut down the toll keepers.³⁷ In Jhansi, the Bengalis became the special target of the rebels as they were manning the clerical establishment of the Company state.³⁸

Before 1857, the EIC rarely executed civilian officials of the princely governments whom they fought. An exception occurred in 1781 during the First Anglo-Maratha War, when the EIC's detachment under General Goddard marching from Kalyan to the Konkan put to death a few 'chowkidars' (civilian officials) of the Peshwa.³⁹ But, during the Mutiny, those Indian civilians and government officials suspected of being in league with the mutineers received short shrift at the hands of the EIC's soldiers. James Graham who fought against the rebels had written about November 1857: "From Fatehgar we went off to [Grand] Trunk Road and I think as far as Kanpur, and halfway back again, to protect a convoy of ladies and children coming

down from Agra, and to prevent the Nana's brethren and party crossing from Awadh. However, he did cross, by our police guard sending our boats for them, and I saw seventeen of the said police guard hanging in one tree, if I remember rightly, in consequence.⁴⁰

For survival both the EIC's troops as well as the rebels looted the civilians, a feature which was absent in the pre-1857 warfare in India. On June 12, 1857, the situation was desperate for the rebels inside Delhi. They were left with only three days provisions.⁴¹ So, the rebel soldiers resorted to looting the merchants and traders of Delhi. On June 18, 1857, the desperate 'Padshah' (Bahadur Shah Zafar) issued an order that looting by the troops inside Delhi will not be tolerated. Those soldiers who indulged in pillage and plundering were ordered to camp outside the city of Delhi.⁴²

A 'DIFFERENT' WAR

During the Anglo-Sikh and Anglo-Maratha Wars, only rarely did the EIC's troops resort to pillaging. In September 1781, when the First Anglo-Maratha War was going on, Goddard fleeced Rs 40 lakh from the merchants of Surat.⁴³ It was an anomaly. Rather, the EIC's military commanders were careful enough to pay the villagers whatever the soldiers took from them. During the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-05), Arthur Wellesley paid in cash for the rice which he collected for his soldiers.⁴⁴ But, 1857 was a break in this regard. Raffi Gregorian has shown that after recapturing Delhi, the EIC's soldiers indulged in looting Delhi with unprecedented ruthlessness motivated by a spirit of retribution.⁴⁵ One British civilian officer turned soldier writes about the EIC's logistical method in the following words:

At Hurra, we heard of the arrival in a neighbouring village of reinforcements from Meerut, two Horse Artillery guns, and a party of Carabineers, who had orders to hold the Ghat for us. They had been marching, like ourselves, all night; but not having any of the Meerut district officers with them, and the Ranghur village of Kiwai, at which they halted, being badly affected, they had nothing to eat. When I rode over in the evening, the soldiers had been starving for nearly twenty four hours.... I at once entered the village to arrest the head men, telling them that they would be paid if they brought

food, and their houses fired if they did not. Seeing a couple of calves careering about, I seized one, and one of orderlies another: these we presented to the carbineers.⁴⁶

The village headmen were also taken hostages as security for the government revenue.⁴⁷

Unlike previous conflicts in south Asia, women became an integral part of warfare. The horror of warfare during the Mutiny also touched the white women. One British woman jotted down in her journal on June 30, 1857 about the conditions in Lucknow Residency in the following words:

At nine o'clock we were in a state of siege, completely invested by the enemy, and tremendous firing commenced. A very fierce attack was made on the Bailee Guard Gate at the back of this house. No sooner was the first gun fired than the ladies and children were all hurried down stairs into an underground room, called the Tye Khana, damp, dark and gloomy as a vault, and excessively dirty. Here we sat all day, feeling too miserable, anxious, and terrified to speak, the gentlemen occasionally coming down to reassure us and tell us how things were going on. James was nearly all the day in the hospital, where the scene was terrible: the place so crowded with wounded and dying men that they had no room to pass between them, and everything in a state of indescribable misery, discomfort, and confusion.⁴⁸

Despite the assurance of the "gentlemen", the distress of the women increased when on the next day they saw terrible face of war. On July 1, 1857, the above mentioned woman made the following entry: "Poor Miss Palmer's leg was shot off this afternoon at the Residency. Sir Henry Lawrence too had a narrow escape; a round shot passed just above his head through the room in which he was sitting. The firing has been incessant the whole day, and we have been close prisoners to the Tye Khana."⁴⁹

The emergence of people's war allowed the women in India to come out of purdah in order to direct public affairs. The participation of women in warfare in India before 1857 was very limited. The Nizam of Hyderabad had two battalions of female sepoys of 1,000 each. In 1795, they took part in the battle of Khardah against the Marathas.⁵⁰ In 1857, the most famous female warlord to emerge on the Indian side was Wajid Ali's beautiful Begum Hazrat Mahal. Hazrat Mahal, originally a dancing girl named Iftikhar-un-nisa hailed from a poor family. In 1856, when Wajid Ali Shah was deposed by the British and

left Lucknow for Kolkata, she remained in Awadh. The Begum's ambition was to make Awadh independent of the British and to place her son Bajris Qadr on the throne. In August 1857, 12-year old Bajris Qadr was crowned and his mother emerged as the real power behind the throne. Hazrat Mahal got her son's enthronement legitimised by the rebel government in Delhi. She symbolised the spirit of resistance in Awadh. In Awadh the chief centre of rebellion was Lucknow, where the rebels under the leadership of the Begum went on a strategic defensive. Hazrat Mahal used to hold durbar where she provoked the chieftains and the soldiers to fight the British with vigour. When Raja Man Singh went over to the British side, the Begum confiscated his estates. Hazrat Mahal, though no battlefield commander was a first grade strategist and a good administrator.⁵¹

After the recapture of Lucknow by Colin Campbell in 1858, the Begum left the city with her retainers and moved into northern Awadh. Due to concentric pressure exerted by both the EIC's forces and the Nepali Army, in March 1859, the Begum's forces comprising 40,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry accompanied by 18 guns was compelled to cross river Gandak and move into the Terai region of Nepal.⁵² The rebel force continued to be shadowed by the Bengal Yeomanry Cavalry and a detachment of the Nepali Army under Colonel Hem Dal Thapa.⁵³ The Begum's force suffered horrendously from disease and inadequate food.⁵⁴ Due to pressure from the British, Maharaja Jung Bahadur refused political asylum to the Begum and instead gave her an ultimatum to lay down arms. Otherwise, warned Jung Bahadur, the British and the Nepali Army would jointly attack the Begum's force.⁵⁵ She never surrendered and ultimately died in Nepal in 1879.⁵⁶

Another heroine of 1857 was the Rani of Jhansi. By early June 1857, the mutineers at Jhansi received Rs 35,000 in cash, two elephants and five horses from the Rani. The Rani also raised 14,000 men and two guns which were hitherto buried within the fort to escape the scrutiny of the British.⁵⁷ Like a true warrior, the Rani died in the battlefield. Along with elite women there was also spontaneous involvement of women at the subaltern level. On April 30, 1858, Hugh Rose wrote as regards the siege of Jhansi: "The women were seen working in the batteries and carrying ammunition".⁵⁸

Frequently, women did not get a fair deal from the men in arms. On March 12, 1858, Arthur Lang, a young engineer officer who participated in the Lucknow campaign made the following entry in his journal: "Our men killed native women also".⁵⁹ However, both during the Civil War of the US and in the 1857 uprising very few women actually took position on the firing line. The women played a very important role in strengthening morale, sustaining the home front and in vital non-combat jobs associated with armies i.e., providing food, munitions and other logistical back up.⁶⁰

In people's war, most of the participants risk their lives not for tangible incentives but for ideological reasons. The Confederate and the Union soldiers were inspired by the ideas of liberty and republicanism. Many Confederate soldiers were willing to die for the idea of self-government. James M McPherson in his study of the combat motivation of the American Civil War soldiers asserts that patriotism was the last refuge of genuinely committed soldiers especially when the going became tough.⁶¹ Along with the secular ideology of nationalism, religion played an important role in egging the participants to participate in the "firing line". In Imperial Germany, Protestantism radicalised nationalism especially among the middle class and the intelligentsia. This in turn aided the creation of the spirit of militarism which was evident during the First World War.⁶²

C A Bayly writes that at least in some portions of India, the rebellion assumed the proportions of a patriotic revolt.⁶³ In mid-19th century India, a complex compound between religion, caste and racial feelings gave rise to anti-'goralog' (white men) nationalism among large chunks of Hindus and Muslims in north India. The rebels to a great extent relied on mobilising the Indians on the issue of religion. The civilian bureaucrat George Clerk was quite right in asserting before the Peel Commission (which was set up in 1859 to ascertain the causes behind the 1857 uprising) that religious fanaticism played an important role in the 1857 rebellion.⁶⁴ The rebels did not fight merely for professional pride or the lure of monetary gains. Those who joined the side of the rebels had an ideology to fight and die for. The use of religion as a motivating ideology was partly spontaneous. On June 6, 1857, a group of 50 sowars and 300 sepoys led by Bakshi Ali the jail darogha in Jhansi raised the cry of 'deen ki jai' (victory of religion).⁶⁵ When the 3rd Cavalry

entered Delhi, they shouted 'Deen Deen'. And they were followed by an excited Muslim mob.⁶⁶

Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Lowth Harington was near the mark when in 1859 he remarked that the rebel soldiers occasionally used religion as a medium to legitimise their grievances.⁶⁷ The rebels used religion to legitimise their action within the wider Indian society. And the Indian leaders used this card with ruthlessness. The Rani of Jhansi utilised the issue of religion for gaining recruits to her standard. The Rani used religious mendicants to fan the embers of religious hatred among the people.⁶⁸ Nana Sahib also played the religious card. On January 2, 1858, Nana's chief lieutenant issued the following proclamation from Kalpi:

My master Sreemunt Maharajah Peshwa Bahadur at the sacrifice of every ease and comfort as well as of his wealth, property etc has for the purpose of defending the religion both of the Hindus and Muslims prepared himself to slaughter the followers of Christ as they are the enemies of the faith of the Muslims and Hindus. The said Maharaja has, by waging a war with the Christians, put several of them to the sword and has resolved not to refrain himself from killing them as long as he breathes his living air, and to annihilate at once the people of this race now in India.⁶⁹

The rebel leaders painted the conflict as a religious-cum-racial war to motivate their followers.

Besides the strategic objective of using religion to mobilise the masses for an all or nothing struggle against the 'feranghis', for immediate tactical advantages also religion was used. The rebels used religious symbols for ensuring desertion within the Indian military contingents loyal to the EIC. On September 19, 1857, at Thana Bhaon about 10 miles from Shambee, the rebels numbering 3,000 hoisted the traditional green flag of the Muslims. The rebels projected the idea that they were fighting for Islam against the heretics. As a result, three 'dufadars' and 13 sowars (who were Muslims from Haryana) of the 1st Punjab Cavalry deserted.⁷⁰

CASTE AND RELIGION

Both the colonised and the colonisers in 19th century India took the issue of caste seriously, and for the Hindus, this was associated with their religion. And both sides, especially when rumours were rampant, perceived the struggle of 1857 as a

"caste war". On June 13, 1857, a British civilian wrote from Punjab: "It is lamentable to think that this should all have come from a foolish attempt of General Anson to interfere with the caste of the men by greasing bullets of their cartridges with beef suet and pig's fat mixed, and this (although done in ignorance), combined with one or two officers who, with more zeal than prudence, preached to their men, led them to think the Government intended forcibly to make them Christians."⁷¹ The 12th Infantry Regiment stationed at Jhansi received a letter from the rebel government at Delhi stating that the Bengal Army had mutinied. Since this regiment had remained faithful to the British, the men had become outcaste and lost their faith. Immediately, four sepoys who were ringleaders started provoking the regiment to rebel. And finally they succeeded.⁷²

Rumour being the principal subaltern means of communication played an important role in mobilisation of the insurgents. Rumour evoked comradeship. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that the mindset of the illiterate peasants is influenced by the phonocentrism of a tradition where 'sruti' – that which is heard – has the greatest authority. Her observations are all the more applicable to the peasants of mid-19th century India.⁷³ The Muslim sowars of 1st Punjab Cavalry were also upset due to the rumour about the activities of General Cortlandt's force operating on behalf of the EIC in Hansi and Rohtak districts, the region from which the cavalrymen were recruited. In times of trouble, people tend to believe in rumour. The rumour was circulating among the men that white troops were killing Indian women in an act of vengeance.⁷⁴ The Begum of Awadh deliberately spread rumours in order to encourage last ditch resistance among the rebels. As the military situation worsened, the Begum's followers spread the rumour among the inhabitants of Awadh that the British would not only disarm the populace but would also deprive them of their caste and religion.⁷⁵

The British were not free from the effects of rumour. The terrible anxieties of the British officers and civilians which made them susceptible to rumour raised their passion. In mid-May 1857, a rumour circulated among the British inhabitants of Lucknow that the rebels were exposing the dead bodies of the British soldiers in the streets of Delhi. Instead of giving a

Christian burial to the dead white soldiers, the British believed that the rebels were heaping abuse on their dead bodies.⁷⁶ Rumour was also circulating far away from the battlefields. And this probably explains the upsurge of raw passion among the white civilians far removed from the scene of carnage. John Chalmers was a Scottish civilian engineer stationed in Punjab. On June 22, 1857, he wrote in a letter from Gujranwala to one of his friends: "I can assure you that my vengeance is so excited against the wretches, that I would gladly join in the compact said to be entered into, to give no quarter".⁷⁷ On the same date Chalmers penned to his friend: "Hundreds of Europeans have been murdered in cold blood; European ladies violated, publicly exposed, and then tortured to death. Soldiers have amused themselves by pitching European children about from bayonet to bayonet: in fact, they have tortured and murdered every one they could overpower with a white face, or who, however black, professed Christianity, and this without respect to age or sex."⁷⁸ Even among the white women, there was an upsurge of raw emotion. On May 16, 1857, a British woman residing in Lucknow noted in her journal: "You can only rule these Asiatics by fear: if they are not afraid, they snap their fingers at you".⁷⁹

One of the sources of rumour among the inhabitants of India was the free press. In 1857, the press, by modern day standards, showed some signs of behaving "irresponsibly". In May 1857, the papers published in Persian language encouraged the Muslim inhabitants of the city to fight the 'feranghis'.⁸⁰ One gets a glimpse of functioning of the English newspapers from a letter written by a Scot from Punjab. In a letter dated May 30, 1857, he writes:

From the newspapers you will hear horrid accounts of the Delhi affair, but the one half will never be published. The brutes oiled over and set fire to one lady, killed children at the breast; and 50 ladies and children who got into the palace of the king, who, the rascal, was put on the throne by us, and has received 12,000 sterling pounds a month of pension for years, were, after remaining there five days, stripped naked, paraded through the crowded streets of the largest city in India in that state, under a burning sun, and then killed with spears slowly and in cold blood — ladies and children who never knew what it was before to walk a mile.⁸¹

Interestingly, even in the US, newspapers of the period, which especially enjoyed a wide circulation among the military

camps fanned emotions of the citizens of both the Confederacy and the Union.⁸²

The rumour regarding greased cartridges proved to be most dangerous for the EIC. Bahadur Shah asserted: 'Kuchch Chil-i-Rum nahin kya, ya Shah-i-Rus nahin, Jo kuchuh kya na sare se, so cartouche ne' (Not the Sultanate of Rum [Ottoman] not the Tsar of Russia made the conquest easy, The only weapon was a cartridge).⁸³ On May 19, 1857, Captain Reynell Taylor, deputy commissioner 2nd class in Punjab, at Kangra, wrote to Major David Wilkie commanding the 4th Infantry Regiment at Nurpur:

Yes I believe it is all the cartridge. We had a talk with your native officers...last night. Their tone was natural enough. They said that of course the government was quite right to make its own arrangements for the protection of its forts... They had long eaten the government salt and were not in the least inclined to any disobedience but with regard to the cartridges it was a boon the government withdrawing them. And it evidently appeared from their conversation that they did labour under the impression that there was something in them and that some trick injurious to their religion had been intended. Their expression was that government had never before done anything of the sort. I asked them if government or their officers had ever told them lies on any subject and they said never but however that might be it was kind of the government to withdraw the cartridges...It is an extraordinary thing and ought to be a lesson to us.⁸⁴

LIMITATIONS OF PEOPLE'S WAR

The whole Native Regular Army are ready to break out, and unless a blow be soon struck the Irregulars as a body will follow their example. Send for our troops from Persia. Intercept the force now on its way to China and bring it to Calcutta.

*Telegram from John Lawrence, chief commissioner, Punjab, to G F Edmonstone, secretary to the government of India, May 18, 1857.*⁸⁵

Despite highly intense warfare during 1857-59 in India, the level of popular participation in the subcontinent was much less than the American Civil War. Just before the mutiny, there were 3,11,000 sepoys, sowars and gunners commanded by 5,362 British officers and only 40,000 European soldiers (both EIC and the Queen's royal forces combined).⁸⁶ First, we will consider the military manpower mobilised by the British and then by the rebel regime.

As regards the East India Company's military manpower mobilisation, the estimate also includes the mounted police raised by the government as they also participated actively in fighting the insurgents. In May 1857, the most exclusive Bengal Army units were deployed west of river Sutlej, in Punjab the British had 38,500 soldiers (12,000 European troops, 16,000 Punjabi infantry, 9,000 Punjabi cavalry and 1,500 Gurkhas).⁸⁷ The Bengal Army units in Punjab either mutinied or were disarmed. And the British raised troops from Multan, Ferozepur, etc.⁸⁸ In 1857, the 1st and 2nd Irregular Sikh Cavalry regiments were raised from the ex-Khalsa soldiers who were disbanded after the second Anglo-Sikh War.⁸⁹ Between 1857 and 1859, the number of Indian soldiers in the Punjab Frontier Force (henceforth PFF) rose from 25,000 to 43,736 and then to 52,446. The PFF recruited Punjabi Muslims from west Punjab (present-day Punjab in Pakistan, i.e., the area around the Salt Range, etc), Trans-Indus Muslims (Peshawar, Kohat) and Sikhs from central Punjab (Manjha and Malwa) plus the jats from Haryana.⁹⁰

On April 1, 1858, the loyal elements of the Bengal Army and the PFF comprised 80,053 Indians (1,715 in the artillery, 209 sappers and miners, 11,453 cavalry and the rest infantry). Of them, there were only 8,818 low caste Hindus and 572 Christians. The rajput and the brahmin personnel were drastically reduced to 8,526 and 10,363 respectively. The biggest chunk of manpower came from Punjab.⁹¹ The Bombay Army was composed of Hindustanis (men from north India, i.e., brahmins and rajputs from Awadh especially), Konkanis and Deccanis (Muslims from Deccan).⁹²

The two tables show that in midst of the mutiny, the size of the Madras and the Bombay armies did not register any quantum leap. The increase in the number of European soldiers of the Bombay Army between 1857 and 1859 was significant but not massive. By April 1858, there were 96,000 British soldiers in the subcontinent backed up by large number of loyal Indian troops.⁹³

After the recapture of Lucknow in March 1858, the rebels spread all over north India and conducted sporadic low level warfare against the British. The guerrilla war continued till April 8, 1860, when Raja Man Singh betrayed Tantia Tope to the British.⁹⁴ This prolonged attritional struggle forced the

British to mobilise additional manpower. Marginal groups were allowed to serve in the armies both in India during the 1857 uprising and in North America during the American Civil War respectively. The blacks despite being discriminated formed an important constituent of the American Civil War armies. About 1,79,000 blacks, who were mostly former slaves served in the Union Army.⁹⁵ As the high caste personnel of the Bengal Army turned against the EIC, the British mobilised the low castes. In Awadh, where the anti-British bias among the high caste was most intense, the British raised several levies mainly composed of low and middle castes. One such levy was the Aligarh Levy which was composed of Anglo-Indians, and low castes.⁹⁶ Another low caste force was the Fatehgarh Levy.⁹⁷ The Awadh Police Force was composed of ahirs, passis, kurmis, bhungies, chamars, lodh, koree, dhannock and bhauts.⁹⁸ The British also mobilised "wild tribes" during the emergency. As early as 1825, the British had raised a bheel corps for policing the hilly tracts of central India. In 1857, the British raised the 2nd Bheel Corps composed of 1,000 bheels. It was used against the mutinous troops of Sindia.⁹⁹ However, the total number of low castes and tribes inducted in the irregular units of the British-Indian Army was much lower than the number of regular soldiers.

The British also depended on the armies of the Indian princes who remained loyal to the Company. The princes ruled over a large chunk of territory and the total number of inhabitants under their rule numbered 4,00,00,000.¹⁰⁰ The Jammu Contingent of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir and the Subsidiary Force of Hyderabad (10,698 men) did good service for the British during the Mutiny.¹⁰¹ The army of the neighbouring friendly princely state of Nepal was also put in the field against the rebels. In 1858, during the Lucknow campaign, Jung Bahadur bought 16,000 Gurkhas.¹⁰²

The British also ordered several Indian chieftains and landed magnates to raise armed men for maintaining law and order on behalf of the EIC. For instance Saifullah Khan, a Muslim gentleman in the rajput state of Karauli in central India raised 600 matchlock men for aiding the British.¹⁰³ Numerous such examples could be given. However, the number of such informal forces raised by the British was much less than the size of the regular units at the disposal of the EIC.

The rebels depended on those sepoys and sowars who had mutinied and also raised men from the territory which they briefly controlled. A rough estimate of the sepoys and sowars in the rebel camp could be made. The Bengal Army's cavalry regiments recruited Muslims from Awadh and Rohilkhand and the infantry regiments were composed of high caste Hindus from Bihar and Awadh. Very few middle castes like ahirs were in the Bengal Army. Low castes and Eurasians were not allowed entry.¹⁰⁴ The bhumihars from Bihar started joining the Bengal Army infantry from the late 18th century.¹⁰⁵ Most of the brahmins of the Bengal Army infantry came from Baiswara and Banoda districts of Awadh.¹⁰⁶ In P J O Taylor's estimate, about 1,00,000 Indian soldiers rebelled. By July 1858, due to death and desertion, only 15,000 of them remained.¹⁰⁷ Stephen P Cohen says that out of 1,30,000 Indian soldiers of the Bengal Army, 70,000 joined the revolt, 30,000 deserted or were disarmed and 30,000 remained loyal to the EIC.¹⁰⁸

Several princely armies also joined the rebels. For example the Gwalior Contingent which comprised seven infantry regiments, two cavalry regiments and five artillery battalions en masse joined the rebels. The Mehidpur, Malwa, Bhopal and Kotah Contingents along with Bharatpur Cavalry revolted during 1857.¹⁰⁹ The rebel leaders also raised several levies of armed men. The Begum of Awadh's force (comprised of the mutinied regiments plus levies raised by her) which crossed river Gandak was estimated as numbering 40,000 men.¹¹⁰ By February 1859, the Awadh Begum's force moving along the Awadh-Nepal border numbered between 5,000 to 10,000 cavalry and 10,000 infantry.¹¹¹ However, no accurate estimate of the princely units and levies in the service of the rebels could be made due to lack of data.

Before the beginning of the Civil War, the American Army was in a much more pitiable state when compared to the Sepoy Army. The United States' regular army numbered only 16,000 men and had no officers who had commanded any formation bigger than a brigade in battle.¹¹² However, in the course of war, mass mobilisation became the order of the day. In total, some three million men saw action on both sides in course of the Civil War.¹¹³ The population of North America in 1860 was 31 million. The Confederacy and the Union resorted to

conscription during April 1862 and March 1863 respectively.¹¹⁴ The total enlistment in the Union Army numbered 2,898,304 and in the Confederate Army about 1,406,180 men.¹¹⁵ Conscription was absent in India because of India's huge demographic resources and low manpower demands during the mutiny compared to the American Civil War. The population of India exceeded 200 million.¹¹⁶ Even the Crimean War witnessed mobilisation of larger number of military manpower. Against a force of 3,00,000 French, English, Sardinian and Turkish soldiers, Russia in 1856 mobilised 31,954 officers, 17,42,343 men and another 25,00,000 militia and irregulars.¹¹⁷

Excluding civilian casualties, the American Civil War cost the lives of 3,60,000 Union and 2,60,000 Confederate soldiers.¹¹⁸

Table 1: Strength of the Bombay Army – 1856-61

Date	Indian Contingent				European Contingent		
	European Officer	Indian Officer	Rank and File	Total	Officers	Rank and File	Total
July 1, 1856	836	810	34,313	35,960	506	8,967	9,473
July 1, 1857	866	818	35,701	37,385	528	8,948	9,476
July 1, 1858	855	991	40,695	42,541	1,141	21,556	22,697
July 1, 1859	863	1,072	44,147	46,082	1,042	22,361	23,403

Source: Records of Chief Commands 1865-76, Establishment of the Bombay Army, Major T Stock, acting adjutant general, Poona, July 12, 1861, MSS.EUR.F.114, 5(4), Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London.

Table 2: Strength of the Indian Portion of the Madras Army – 1857-60

Date	Strength of the Indian Portion of the Madras Army	Remarks
January 1, 1857	41,288	Between April 1, 1857 and March 31, 1860, 22,874 recruits joined.
January 1, 1858	46,662	
January 1, 1859	58,999	
January 1, 1860	60,377	

Source: General Frederick Roberts, *Correspondence with England while Commander-in-Chief in Madras: 1881-85*, Vol 2 (Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1890), Private, to the Duke of Cambridge, No XLVII, June 29, 1883, pp 94-95, L/MIL/17/5/1615, Part 2, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London.

The mutiny of 1857 witnessed much less casualties. During the mutiny, about 2,034 British soldiers died in action and another 8,978 died from disease. The number of civilians and Indian soldiers killed exceeded 1,00,000.¹¹⁹ The rebels mobilised a larger number of men compared to the EIC but suffered greater casualties. Besides inferior hardware, command was a serious problem with the rebels.

Most of the Indian officers of the Bengal Army units which mutinied provided leadership to the rebels. In the Bengal Army the sepoys were promoted to officer ranks on the basis of seniority. On an average, the recruits joined the army when they were about 17 years old. A minimum of 35 years of service were required for getting promotion to the rank of 'jemadar'. However, all the sepoys were not that lucky. And about 13 years service as a jemadar was required before securing a promotion to the rank of 'subadar'. So, the average age of the subadars and jemadars were about 70 and 65. Most of the Indian officers due to their age were infirm and ready for transfer to the Invalid Corps.¹²⁰ A huge percentage of the Indian officers were indeed illiterate. The Indian officers did not have to pass any test or examination for a promotion from a lower grade to a higher one.¹²¹ Hence, they were not that combat effective either mentally or physically.

In addition, the emergence of the people's war also witnessed the rise of several civilian leaders among the Indians. The best commander on the rebel side was Tantia Tope (real name Ramchandra Pandurang) a brahmin aged 41 with a pock-marked face.¹²² He was no match for the professionals of the EIC. He was a 'musahib' (companion) of Nana Saheb before the outbreak of the mutiny. He had no military experience or training. At his young age he was trained only in fencing and shooting.¹²³ The inability of the rebel leaders to command and coordinate large formations and their inadequacies in grasping tactical complexities resulted in the military defeat of the rebels in most of the battles.

In contrast, the British officers were professionals. Professionalism consisted of expertise in the application of organised violence. Those who entered commissioned ranks had education in the military academies and their career advancement depended on acquiring further knowledge in their profession.

From 1741, the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich provided technical education to those officers who joined the engineering branch and the artillery units. The officers of the infantry units were educated at Sandhurst and the EIC's military seminary at Addiscombe. It is true that due to the prevalence of the purchase system, professionalism among the British officer corps was much lower compared to the German officer corps.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the British officers in terms of technical expertise and education in the theories of warfare were head and shoulders above the Indian rebel leaders. And in case of the American Civil War armies, West Point graduates provided the leadership. Modelled on the Ecole Polytechnique in France, the West Point curriculum emphasised engineering, drill and small unit tactics.¹²⁵

CONCLUSION

Violence inflicted by both the rebels and the British against each other and frequently on the non-combatants and civil society had an instrumental function. By inflicting violence, both the colonial state and the rebel regime tried to shore up their own war effort and weaken that of their enemy. Infliction of large-scale violence was necessary to destroy the financial and demographic potential of the enemy and also affect their morale. So, there was nothing uniquely colonial about the savagery against non-combatants displayed by both the British and the rebels during 1857-59. The brutalisation of combat was due to ideological commitments on both sides. Patriotism and a sense of revenge drove the Union and Confederate troops as well. Similarly, muscular Christianity and revenge provided fire to the British in India. The rebels were motivated by a "mix" of religion and caste pride that constituted a sort of pre-modern nationalism. Again women both in the American Civil War and in the mutiny played an important role but their participation in actual combat remained marginal. Comparative history is also a sort of parallel history. And parallel history like parallel lines never meet. So a lot of dissimilarities do exist and can be observed between the people's war in the mid-19th century North America and in 1857-59 India. The military manpower mobilisation in India by both the rebels and the Company during 1857 was minuscule (both in absolute numbers as well as

in percentage terms vis-à-vis the population base) compared with the mass armies mobilised during the American Civil War. The participation of the marginal group (i e, blacks) was much more intense in North America during the Civil War compared to the role played by the tribes and low castes in India during the 1857 uprising. Nevertheless, both the American Civil War as well as the 1857 Mutiny irrevocably changed the face of war.

NOTES

- 1 The story of linear evolution of total war is teleological and has been challenged by several historians. Still, I think such a developmental model is helpful in understanding the gradual unfolding of warfare in Eurasia and North America between late 18th century and the fourth decade of the 20th century.
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- 3 Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, ‘Introduction’ in Förster and Nagler (eds), *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-71*, German Historical Institute Washington, Cambridge, DC and Cambridge University Press, 1997, p 5.
- 4 John Whiteclay Chambers II, ‘The American Debate over Modern War: 1871-1914’ in Stig Förster, Roger Chickering and Manfred F Boemeke (eds), *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p 243.
- 5 Mark E Neely Jr, ‘Was the Civil War a Total War?’ in Förster and Nagler (eds), *On the Road to Total War*, p 36.
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- 7 Steven D Jackman, ‘Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and “Old Prussian Drill” in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871-1914’, *Journal of Military History* (henceforth *JMH*), Vol 68, No 1 (2004), p 79.
- 8 I do not want to enter into the sterile debate of whether 1857 was a mutiny or an uprising or a national revolt. What had begun as a military mutiny was transformed into an uprising involving the agrarian society over large parts of north and central India. I have used the terms the “Great Mutiny” or the mutiny and the “1857 uprising”, interchangeably.
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- 14 Forster and Nagler, 'Introduction' in Forster and Nagler (eds), *On the Road to Total War*, pp 5, 8.
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- 18 Letters of Archdale Wilson, 6807-483, National Army Museum (hereafter NAM), London.
- 19 Letters of Archdale Wilson, 6807-483.
- 20 Robert Henry Wallace Dunlop, *Service and Adventure with the Khakee Ressalah or Meerut Volunteer Horse during the Mutinies of 1857-58*, 1858, reprint, Legend Publications, Allahabad, 1974, p 150.
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The Rebel Army in 1857

At the Vanguard of the War of Independence or a Tyranny of Arms?

Sabyasachi Dasgupta

THIS paper argues that the “mutiny” by the sepoys was an act of repudiation not only against the East India Company or Company but also the traditional ruling class of Indian society. It was an assertion of autonomous power, a force that threatened to sweep away symbols of colonial power in northern India. It also threatened to alter traditional power equations in indigenous society. The nature of the outbreak and the rapidly evolving political dynamics during the course of the mutiny represented a severe threat to established hierarchies in indigenous society. The sepoys sought to rapidly carve out an autonomous space for themselves within the power hierarchy.

There has been the argument that the sepoy assertion was not synonymous with people’s power. That the autonomy of the sepoys did not represent the autonomy of the people. This paper seeks to differ with these representations and places the sepoys at the vanguard of the people’s rebellion. Historians have argued that the grievances of the sepoys merged with those of the people or the peasantry. Some have gone so far as to say that the sepoys were peasants in uniform.

I argue that the sepoys despite their strong links with their parent society possessed a distinct identity and considered themselves apart from indigenous society. Company service, which they were to so violently repudiate in 1857, conversely gave them a sense of empowerment. The sepoys aspired to be the new elite and were ready to take on the old elite and the common peasantry in this endeavour. One must remember that the Bengal sepoy, usually of high caste origins, came from a

middle farmer background and hardly belonged to the elite of indigenous society. A perusal of the class and caste base of the Bengal Army would help elucidate this point better.

CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF THE BENGAL ARMY

The Bengal Army or more specifically its infantry units consisted mainly of high caste men from Awadh and Bihar.¹ The Company's main catchment area corresponded to modern day eastern Uttar Pradesh and the Bhojpur region of present day Bihar. The Bengal Army's recruiting policy was motivated by strong and enduring beliefs which held that the high caste sepoy hailing from a yeoman farmer background was naturally obedient, faithful, brave and constituted in general excellent soldier material.² Though the 1830s and 1840s would see the increasing representation of Gorkhas and Sikhs in the Bengal Army, high caste domination would be intact in the years leading up to 1857. If the caste composition of the 34th Regiment infantry stationed at Meerut prior to 1857 is taken as representative of general recruitment patterns in the Bengal Army, high castes still comprised over 50 per cent of the Bengal Army.³

The general mode of recruitment was to ask serving sepoys and officers leaving for their native village on furlough, to bring back high caste recruits from among their relatives and neighbours. The induction of Sitaram into the Bengal Army is an apt example. Sitaram was born in the village of Tilowee in erstwhile Oudh and modern UP in 1797. His father was a yeoman farmer who owned about 150 acres of land. Sitaram joined the army in 1812 at the behest of his uncle who was a jemedar in the Bengal Army.⁴ The uncle had been granted six months of furlough and on his way home stayed with Sitaram's family for some days. He soon settled into a routine of every evening narrating wondrous tales about the lands Company service had taken him to and of the immense prosperity of the Company to a crowd of awestruck listeners including his nephew. Sitaram was filled with wonderment at these stories and longed for the time when he might be a soldier in the Company Army. As Sitaram says:

The rank of *Jemedar*, I looked on as quite equal to that of Ghazi-ud-din Hyder the king of Oudh himself, in fact of even more importance. He

had such a splendid necklace of gold beads and above all he appeared to have an unlimited supply of gold *mohurs*. I longed for the time when I would possess the same which I then thought would be directly mine if I became the company bahadur's servant.⁵

His uncle observing the rapt attention with which Sitaram heard his tales, laid before him the possibility of joining the army. Sitaram jumped at the prospect of enlisting in the army despite knowing that his mother who wished him to become a priest would object strenuously. The uncle left for his native village 50 miles away saying that he would enquire on Sitaram on his way to rejoining his regiment on the expiration of his furlough. If Sitaram was still steadfast in his resolve then he would take the boy along with him with the intention of enlisting him in his own regiment.⁶

Sitaram's narrative makes it amply clear that the Bengal Army was in some measure a closed institution where ties of caste, clan and residence predominated. Village life and ties were to an extent replicated in the army as the native recruits made their own living arrangements by constructing huts in a manner not very different from their native villages. All this ensured that the sepoys retained strong links with their parent society. Regular visits home on furlough to visit their families, which they had left behind, also ensured a periodic regeneration of their contact and affinity with their parent society.

THE SEPOY: A PEASANT IN UNIFORM?

The strong links of the sepoys with their parent society coupled with their middle farmer origins have led historians such as Rudrangshu Mukherjee to argue that the sepoys were basically peasants in uniform. Mukherjee asserts that the participation of the peasantry in 1857 assumes greater significance as the sepoys were after all peasants with close ties with their kin in the villages. According to him, this ensured that the peasantry often took on autonomous initiatives shedding their subordinate status. He argues that this is why landed magnates like Beni Madho for instance were persuaded by the sepoys and his clansmen to continue fighting.⁷

Mukherjee's notion appears simplistic. While there is no doubt that the sepoy had significant links with his parent society,

he does not take into account the fact that army life and training must have moulded his mentality to an extent. This is true for all professional armies and the Bengal Army was no exception. Huntington for instance argues that the members of the same profession exhibit a notion of organic unity and conceive of themselves as a group distinct from laymen, in this case the civilian. This sense of unity ensures that an index of professional competence and responsibility is created. Huntington in short is thus attempting to define "corporateness", the creation of a distinct soldier identity or what is often defined as a corporate identity.⁸

I seek to demonstrate that the recruitment policy of the Bengal Army would ensure that the Bengal sepoy would develop a hybrid identity. His separation from his parent society would be imperfect. He was neither a peasant in uniform nor did he perceive himself as totally distinct or cut off from his parent society. He had multiple identities and it was the uniqueness of the situation, which led him to assert a particular aspect of his identity. After all, his conflict was not only with the colonial government, he was also jockeying for power within his own parent society. When it came to it, he would emphasise the fact that he was a Company sepoy, a truism which rendered him distinct and possibly antagonistic to his parent society despite his strong links with it.

This antagonism would be revealed in his active conflicts with both the non-privileged peasantry and the native elite. The sepoys were a terror to all sections of society. They often misused their access to the British resident of Lucknow with the intent of establishing fraudulent claims. Sleeman mentions an invalid subedar, Sheik Mehboob Ali, who acquired a village from a great landlord by influencing the resident, thereby establishing his claim on it. Company service was thus giving him a leeway, status and influence, which he could not otherwise aspire to. The sepoy on his part was determined to make the best possible use of the advantages Company service offered to him.⁹

Sitaram's autobiography also gives us a vivid picture of the leverage Company service offered to the sepoys. Sitaram while narrating the circumstances, which led to him joining the Bengal Army, says that his father was hardly averse to the idea though

his mother was terribly upset at the prospect of Sitaram being drafted into the army. His father was anticipating a prospective legal battle over a mango grove the family owned. Evidently serving sepoys hailing from Oudh could ensure through the good offices of the British resident in Lucknow that cases involving them and their families would be promptly heard in the courts; a privilege ordinary members of indigenous society were denied.¹⁰

THE SEPOYS: THE NEW ELITE?

The sepoys therefore sought to be the new elite. Service in the Company had emboldened and empowered him. He represented a dynamic force, which sought to dominate the indigenous society from where he originated and to which he belonged despite his often acrimonious relations with his parent society. The mutiny of the sepoys could thus not be equated or treated as synonymous with a people's rebellion as some historians have sought to portray it. Rajat Ray, for instance, says that the mutiny by the sepoys lay at the very heart of the people's rebellion and was the most democratic part of the rebellion. Ray argues that the sepoys were not simply peasants in uniform; army service gave them a perspective wider than the tiny world of the average villager. The average peasant rebellion before 1857 and till the 1920s, Ray argues, was limited and local in nature and sought to base itself on kinship ties. Ray posits that the peasantry led by the sepoys would strive towards forms of government, which contained a democratic and republican spirit within what he terms as its hierarchical, princely structure.¹¹

Ray posits that these sepoys asserted an autonomous zone of power for the people by being a decisive voice in the restoration of indigenous authority in areas, which had been liberated from British rule. Ray says that though the sepoys entertained no thoughts of setting themselves up as the government, they insisted on having the final say. Ray shows how the ex-nawab of Banda had to appease the mutineers after he had summarily assumed power. The nawab placated them by inviting them to a feast and acknowledging their right to have the final say in all matters. Similarly Ray says that the sepoys played a crucial role

in the restoration of Lakshmibai in Jhansi. The sepoys were in two minds actually after a dispute with Lakshmibai's delegates. Sadashiv Rao, a kinsman of Lakshmibai's late husband had also staked his claim to the throne of Jhansi and these sepoys were toying with the idea of preferring his claims over the rani. Ray demonstrates that the latter ultimately secured her claim by paying the sepoys a large sum of money. Ray also argues that the sepoys set up councils through which they exercised power in their centres of power such as Lucknow, Delhi etc.¹²

I argue that the revolt of the people could not be termed as a revolt of the people with the sepoys as flag-bearers. The sepoys during 1857 were a force by themselves. They were neither with the people nor were they really interested in restoring the old symbols of power. Years of Company service had given them the confidence to cast aside their traditional servitude to make bold and assertive statements. They had not acquired the confidence to totally repudiate the old order. They possibly felt that they lacked the legitimacy to do so in the eyes of the people. But they were no longer in awe of traditional figures of authority. These sepoys for the time being needed the support of the people and traditional ruling class. At the same time they had a measure of contempt for both sections.

This was exemplified by their behaviour towards the general populace. The mutineers at Delhi were often at loggerheads with the people of Delhi. They were especially hard on merchants, moneylenders and bankers and did not spare the common people either. Their exactions reached such unmanageable proportions that people pledged to protect themselves against the mutineers. Shopkeepers disgusted with the exactions of the sepoys refused to open their shops and flooded the emperor with complaints. The emperor had to implore the shopkeepers to open their shops. Yet the shopkeepers could hardly gather the courage to do so. The atmosphere was one of dread; the people, the great and the common, lived in terror of being at the receiving end of the sepoy's frustration and caprice.¹³

Jeevan Lal's diary narrates an incident where the sepoys after a disastrous defeat against the British vented their frustration at Bahadur Shah's physician, Ahsanullah Khan whom they had long suspected of being in league with the British. The palace

was surrounded and there were cries for Ahsanullah Khan's head. Alarmed at the conduct of the sepoys, the shopkeepers closed their shops. Jeevan Lal says that the Muslim section of the city feared that the sepoys would murder Bahadur Shah Zafar and indulge in a general massacre.¹⁴

Such fears were by no means unfounded as the sepoys were prone to violence at the slightest provocation. May 21, still early days as far as the rebel presence in Delhi was concerned, witnessed the massacre of innocent citizens. The ostensible provocation was the looting of valuables from the sepoys by 'budmashes' or bad characters of the city who waylaid them in a particular mohalla of Delhi. The sepoys peeved at being robbed took their anger out on the innocent people of the locality and indulged in a large-scale massacre.¹⁵

Therefore it is time that romantic notions of sepoys being at the vanguard of the people's rebellion are shed. The sepoys were on their own with their own agenda though for tactical reasons they could not do without the support of the people or other traditional figureheads. They had to contend with a society, which retained a huge respect for traditional symbols of authority. But they looked to be the decisive force or the final authority as far as decision-making was concerned. As a result sepoy councils sprang up in centres of rebel power such as Delhi and Lucknow. The sepoys exercised decisive power through these councils, though Bahadur Shah Zafar in Delhi or Begum Hazrat Mahal in Lucknow were the ultimate authority on paper. The court as it was called in Delhi, for instance, was formed after the arrival of Bakht Khan in the capital. It was to consist of 10 members, six from the army and four from the civilian administration. All three branches of the army would have equal representation. Members were to be elected by a majority with the criteria supposedly being intelligence, merit and experience. One out of these 10 members was to be elected president by a majority vote. Individual members of the court would be accountable or the respective departments from which they were elected. They would in turn be assisted by committees.¹⁶

The court held regular sessions for five hours each day in the Red Fort while, extraordinary sessions could be convened at any time of the day or night. All decisions had to be arrived at

by majority vote. The court's jurisdiction extended to matters of finance, judicial and of course military. The court was authorised to impose taxes or to establish law courts, appoint judges and police officers. All decisions had to be ratified by the emperor and had to bear his will. If the emperor disagreed with any decision he could send it back to the court for its reconsideration.¹⁷

In reality it was the sepoys who had the final word. The emperor was often compelled to sign and ratify the decisions of the newly established court. Bahadur Shah in his defence before the trial constituted to try him professed his absolute haplessness before the will of the sepoys. The sepoys apparently were in the habit of affixing his seal on empty envelops, the contents of which he was absolutely unaware. While the emperor for tactical reasons may have been overstating his impotence before the sepoys, the fact remains that the sepoys at the moment felt emboldened enough to dictate terms to anybody. Possibly the sheer exhilaration of having risen en masse and having actually wiped out for a while the feared Company rule over large parts of north India gave them a big psychological boost. They had crossed an important psychological barrier. This was not the first time that the sepoys had rebelled. A culture of quid pro quo had long prevailed in the Company armies. The sepoys rendered conditional allegiance in return for certain sentiments being honoured and certain obligations being fulfilled towards them. Non-compliance of these obligations or the disregarding of their sentiments meant that they were rendered free from the need to accord deference. Thus, a mutiny under certain circumstances was considered legitimate by the sepoys and did not constitute indiscipline.¹⁸

But 1857 was different. Earlier mutinies had been local and limited in their scope and vision. They had not looked to challenge the legitimacy of British rule with the possible exception of the Vellore mutiny. But this was different. This was a challenge to the basic foundations of British rule in at least the northern part of India. Caught in the first flush of success the sepoys were in a state of frenzy and brooked no opposition. A strong streak of defiance and assertion was evident in the sepoys who rebelled. This was revealed at multiple levels. It was, for instance, revealed in the manner in which the sepoys asserted

their right to elect their own officers. The sepoys revived old practices such as the 'panch' or panchayat. These were democratic bodies where decisions were arrived at by consensus regarding the course each regiment should take.

The Gwalior contingent, for instance, which rebelled on June 14, elected a subedar major of the First Regiment to be their general. These troops without bothering to elicit the consent of their native officers marched to Gwalior where they demanded of Scindia his plans regarding the future course of action. These sepoys evidently spent their time in convening a panchayat and courts and organising deputations to Scindia which the latter had no choice but to entertain. Finally on July 7, a big contingent of sepoys and officers attended on Scindia in the palace gardens and demanded an assurance from him. When Scindia asked them what their wishes were, the officers professed to reply but the sepoys interrupted and told the maharajah that they had decided to capture Agra and that they would not further wait for his orders.¹⁹

The revolt of the sepoys also seemed to envisage in its vision, resentment against their native officers who on the face of it were at the mercy of the sepoys. Possibly the sepoys had resented the fact that the native officers invariably sided with the European officers in clamping down on cases of day-to-day dissent. Native officers had a curiously dichotomous attitude. Previous localised mutinies had often found the native officers acquiescing in the revolt of the sepoys or in certain instances providing the lead to the revolt though, as mentioned before, the native officer sided with the authorities when it came to stamping out cases of day-to-day dissent by sepoys.²⁰ 1857 was different in the sense it was the average sepoy who held sway. The rebellion was a manifestation of his multifold resentment, which enveloped in its anger multiple layers of hierarchy. No figure was hallowed for them, the sepoy's anger and arrogance would not spare even the emperor.

There were reports that the sepoys, clamouring to be paid, addressed the Mughal emperor in disrespectful terms ('Ari Badshah' or even 'Ari Buddha'). Some were bold enough to pull him by the hand while one apparently tugged his beard asking him to listen. The sepoys even possessed the audacity to demand the queen Zeenat Mahal as a hostage since they

suspected her along with Bahadur Shah's physician Ahsanullah Khan of being in league with the British. As for Ahsanullah Khan their anger against him has already been mentioned. The sepoys on one occasion burst into his apartments and looted it. Ahsanullah Khan luckily for him was not present at the time.²¹

The mutineers as we saw were hardly respectful in their attitude towards Scindia. Their tone towards him was peremptory; they were attempting to dictate terms to him. While they did not attempt to totally cast aside his authority, they would accept his nominal suzerainty on their own terms. Times had changed at least temporarily. The traditional elite could no longer hope to command without their power being questioned and challenged. They were up against a force which had developed irreverence for them. The mutineer's contempt for traditional authority was further revealed by their behaviour during the coronation of Birjis Qadr as the consort of Lucknow. The sepoys crowded into the palace and apparently made a general nuisance of themselves. They noisily commented on the appearance of Birjis Qadr, some drew mocking parallels with the god Krishna, others urged him not to succumb to the pleasures of wine and women. There were some who heaped contempt on him for his timid and timorous appearance. One sepoy overwhelmed with emotion went so far as to embrace him and address him as Krishna.²²

In the tradition-bound society such manifestations of arrogance and familiarity would be unthinkable. But this was a sepoy army which had been unshackled. Years of Company service had already made them a force to be reckoned with in indigenous society. The revolt temporarily made them masters of the situation. Their ardour was yet undiminished by serious reverses; these were the initial moments of heady triumph. The sepoys felt that they could dictate terms to anybody.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude one might ask as to what was the significance of the mutiny? If the sepoy rebellion did not represent the rebellion of the people then what did it represent? Why do we celebrate the revolt as the first war of independence? Why should not we celebrate say the Santhal and the Moplah uprisings or for that

matter countless other uprisings? Why are their 150th anniversaries not commemorated? 2006 was for instance the 200th anniversary of the Vellore mutiny, a mutiny which sparked off disturbances in several places in the Madras Presidency. Unlike 1857 the British could nip these disturbances easily in the bud. Strangely celebrations of the Vellore mutiny were muted. One reason could be that the Vellore mutiny remained local and could not spread to other parts of Madras Presidency as the British clamped down on the burgeoning disturbances at other centres before they could acquire momentum. Therein lies the point. 1857 was unchallenged in its scope, vision and magnitude. The sheer breadth of the area and the sheer savagery of the conflict were unrivalled. The uprising would pose a fundamental challenge to British rule in northern India and would generate a romance and a process of mystification, which endures to this day.

However, the question that arises is: Are we then to assume that the only significance of the mutiny by the sepoys lay in the fact that it was unprecedented in its range and conception? One would argue to the contrary. The sepoy rebellion had some progressive features in spite of its often antagonistic relations with the people. The very fact that they represented a challenge to the old feudal elite represented a progressive feature in itself. The sepoys in their desire to pose an alternative were also proposing an alternative paradigm of government. They possibly realised that they could not hope to replicate old forms of government if they wished to mount a credible challenge. Temperamentally too years of serving in an army where they were implicitly allowed some leverage had made them assertive and confident. They were no longer used to being dictated to. This was apart from the general confidence army service gave them.

Therefore the sepoys though hardly conciliatory in their attitude towards the people were democratic within their own autonomous sphere or zone of operation. In this lies the most significant part of the sepoy rebellion. If we are to imagine a scenario where the sepoys would have prevailed, one doubts whether there would be a reversion to the old native forms of government. The very nature of the success and the huge role played by the sepoys would have ensured against this. While it

is futile to talk in terms of modern notions of parliamentary democracy, it is possible that a new order would have emerged. While the new order might have represented a dictatorship of the sepoys over the people and to a lesser extent the old elite, the egalitarian strands implicit in the internal world of the sepoys would have represented a contradiction. It is possible that this contradiction would have resulted in the formation of a order which was egalitarian and if I may use the word democratic in the truest sense of the term. There lay, one feels, the true significance of 1857.

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- 7 See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Avadh in Revolt 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Penguin, Delhi, 1984.
- 8 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 1972, p 10.
- 9 W H Sleeman, *A Journey through the Kingdom of Oudh, 1849-1850, with Private Correspondence Relative to the Annexation of Oude and British India*, London, 1858, Reprint, Delhi, 1995. See Vol 1, pp 260-314, Vol 2, pp 291-314. Sleeman says that the sepoys were apt to misuse the privilege of petitioning to the resident. They used it to establish all manner of fraudulent claims on landholdings or to get their own rent reduced. They often tried to get back landholdings lost in the past by pressing fraudulent charges before the resident. This is not to say that the sepoys were totally immune to the outrages committed by big talukdars. Maheput Singh, a notorious landlord, attacked and robbed the properties of several serving and retired sepoys and native officers of the Company armies. In most of these cases Singh looted and derived ransom for captured family members. In one instance he dispossessed the family of a subedar from their holdings and turned out all the cultivators. While the aggrieved sepoys and officers represented to the resident in all instances and managed to get out arrest warrants from the court of the king, Singh's influence with the local district representatives of the king ensured that he remained unmolested for a time. Singh was in some instances circumspect in attacking sepoys in

serving in the Company. He encountered considerable resistance in at least a couple of occasions. Finally he made one attack too many on a native officer of the company army. A strong force of the Oude Frontier police and a contingent led by another great talukdar Raja Man Singh was sent to accost Singh and eventually managed to capture him.

10 Sitaram, From Sepoy to Subedar, Delhi, 1970, p 5.

11 See Rajat Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*; see more specifically the section on 'The Mentality of the Mutiny: Conceptions of the Alternative Order in 1857', Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. Ghalib's diary too gives us an idea of the absolute anarchy the rebels heaped upon Delhi. He mentions that the mutineers looted at will. Houses were without discrimination stripped of their belongings. Women with the exception of the wife and daughter of the police chief were stripped of their jewellery. Ghalib seems to imply that women in Delhi were subjects of unwelcome attention from the sepoys and what he called the rabble. While Ghalib's account has strong class bias and was written in the post-mutiny phase with an eye to exonerate him and emphasise his loyalty, its descriptions of the indiscriminate rapine and loot by the sepoys tally with other narratives. Therefore while we should approach his narrative with a critical perspective, we cannot discount its account of the sepoys avarice altogether. See *Dastanbuy: A Diary of the Indian Revolt of 1857*, Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Translated by Khwaja Ahmed Faruqi, Bombay, 1970.

15 Ibid, Jeevan Lal's diary, May 21, 1857. The mutiny papers contain several petitions by ordinary people to Bahadur Shah Zafar complaining against the exactions of the mutineers. Several of the petitions were translated from Urdu for the sake of the trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar. A perusal of these petitions reveal that the mutineer's exactions were not limited to the merchants, bankers and moneyed people in general. For instance, a group of people in charge of the ice-pits supplying ice to the imperial household complained that the mutineers had encamped near their houses and subjected them to great distress. Even the timbers of the roofs of their houses had been carried away. Many inhabitants fearing a danger to their lives had deserted the locality. Petition of Imam-baksh Choudhuri and all the men of the ice-pits, July 18, 1857, see *Proceedings of the Trial of Bahadur Shah, Titular King of Delhi before a Military Commission upon a Charge of Rebellion, Treason and Murder Held at Delhi*, Calcutta, 1858, Petition 33, p 21. In another instance two macebearers of the king alleged that the sepoys had forcibly occupied their dwellings, see *Petition of Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Khan, Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar*, Calcutta, 1895, Petition No 53, p 33.

Durgadas Banerjee's account of his experiences in the mutiny contains several unflattering references to the sepoys and their supposed depredations. Banerjee's account mainly dwells on Bareilly and its neighbouring areas. Banerjee, a clerk in the Bengal Army and a loyalist to the core describes a devastated village, which he sees while on his way to Nainital, which is still in the hands of the British. On enquiring he learns that the

rebel troops had created havoc in the village and the people had fled as a result. Durgadas also affirms that the people of Bareilly were glad to see the English return.

However his account has to be taken with a pinch of salt as he was a loyalist and would naturally be biased against the rebels. Having said that, we cannot totally disregard his account, as there are other comparatively neutral accounts that also point towards the fact that the soldiers were often harsh on the common people. While we should be circumspect, we cannot disregard such reports of sepoy oppression. See Durgadas Banerjee, *Amar Jivana-Charit*, Calcutta, 1924.

- 16 Mutiny Papers kept in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, Bundle 57, Fo Nos 539-541 (Urdu). These documents basically spell out the constitution of the court, its rules and organisation. I am grateful to D R Faizan Ahmed for kindly consenting to translate these documents.

17 Ibid.

- 18 This point has been argued in Sabyasachi Dasgupta's unpublished dissertation, 'In Defence of Honour and Justice: Sepoy Rebellions in the 19th Century', Chapter 2, JNU, 2004.

- 19 Macpherson's report, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, Publications Bureau, Uttar Pradesh, 1957, Vol 2, pp 189-192.

- 20 See again Sabyasachi Dasgupta's unpublished dissertation, Chapter 5.

- 21 See Jiwan Lal's diary, *Two Narratives*, Delhi, 1898.

- 22 FSUP, Vol 2, p 140.

THE MARGINS

Reactivating the Past

Dalits and Memories of 1857

Badri Narayan

I

DEITIES, HISTORIES AND DAILY LIFE

IN the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh there is a village called Majhauwa which is predominantly inhabited by dalit castes like chamar, pasi, dhobi, mali and so on. Next to a narrow footpath inside a field in this village lie four cemented stones. These are called Shahid Baba by the villagers. The dalits of this village worship these stones with red powder; they pour water on them and offer home-made sweets like 'thekua', etc, as a form of worship, regularly. All newly married brides from these castes visit these stones to offer prayers for their future happiness. On enquiring about the history of these stones, the village schoolmaster who is a chamar by caste said that four chamars of this village laid down their lives during the 1857 rebellion. These four men started appearing in the dreams of the villagers, conveying messages that if prayers were offered to these four martyrs they would all prosper. Since then they have been incarnated as gods in the eyes of the villagers, who constructed shrines in their memories and began to pray there for happiness and prosperity.¹

Around the village Shahapur in Arrah district of Bihar, a deity called Rajit Baba is worshipped by some lower caste communities of that region. His 'thaans' (memorial stones) are usually found under 'peepal' trees which are decorated with red loin cloths, red flag, red powder marks, incense sticks, home-made sweets and so on. People of the villages pray for the fulfilment of their wishes at the thaans and after they are fulfilled, offer 'prasad' there. It is said that Rajit Baba became a martyr while

fighting against the British during the 1857 rebellion. He was then regarded as an incarnation of god.²

These are only two examples which show how, in various regions of north India, martyrs of the 1857 rebellion belonging to lower castes have become integral components of the lives of the dalits living there. The question arises why dalits, whose role is not even acknowledged in academic history, have given god-like status to their own heroes of the 1857 rebellion. Does this not reveal the wide gap between academic history writing and people's history? Or is the reincarnation of their heroes of the 1857 rebellion as gods an existential need envinced by the lower castes for their own survival because of the refusal of the so-called Indian mainstream to acknowledge their very existence? Or is it because the memory of the 1857 rebellion has become deeply ingrained in the collective psyche at the grassroots level even though it is claimed that the rebellion was confined to kings and feudal lords and the only contribution of the lower castes in the struggle was as their soldiers, guards and stick wielders?

Who was Rajit Baba who is worshipped with so much devotion in the Shahabad region, now in Arrah district of Bihar? When this question raised itself in my mind I sought the help of historical archives. I found that there is a mention of a certain Rajit Ram in the mail of Allen, dated February 7, 1859 [Vidrohi 1989: 36]. The narrative of Rajit Ram is as follows:

My name is Rajit Ram. By caste I am a 'gwala' (milkman). I was a hawildar in the first company of the 40th Platoon whose job was to distribute salaries to the soldiers. My father's name is Parasram. I am a resident of village Shahpur, paragana Shahpur, district Shahabad. At this moment my age is 56 years. Since an early age I have been working with the East India Company. On July 25, 1857 I participated in the revolt in Danapur. Our first attempt was to capture Coilver Ghat and then move towards Arrah. I stayed in Arrah for two hours. After that I told Sitaram Subedar that I wanted to go home and that I should be granted leave. I was granted leave for six days which I spent in Shahpur. I then went to the jungles of Jagdishpur. The very day that I reached we had to leave for Dullepur to combat the British army. Unfortunately we lost, because of which a few of us stayed on in the jungles, a few went to Baraun and the rest went to Piro. The next morning we all gathered together. At that time Babu Kuber Singh and Babu Amar Singh were our leaders. Under their leadership we all went to Nokha. From there we went to Sasaram, then on to Tilaubhu in

Pahariya and finally to the fort in Rohtashgarh. We kept up our efforts to defeat the British. Negotiating the mountainous road we marched towards Riwa via Rapatganj (Robertsganj) and Daramadganj. But we were neither allowed to stay in Riwa nor allowed to leave. That was why we decided to go to Banda where we spent nearly one and a half months. At Banda rebel soldiers from other regions also gathered. The group included those soldiers as well who had come down from Fatehpur along the Grand Trunk road. There was also one company made up of Indian soldiers belonging to the 52nd Platoon.

It is difficult to say whether the Rajit Baba who is worshipped in many parts of Bihar is the same Rajit Ram or not but it is clear that a soldier belonging to the backward caste with this name has documented his personal experiences of the 1857 rebellion. Another mail of Allen describes the roles of four bhangi rebels belonging to the Arrah and Shahabad region. This fact about the presence of the four bhangis also emerges from the narrative of one Barkandaj, a low rank local level intelligence agent, whose evidence dated May 31, 1858 is recorded in the Dumrao police station. His evidence states that four bhangis were active during the rebellion whose names caused panic among the British [Vidrohi 1989: 37].

II

RURAL NORTH INDIA AND THE STORY OF 1857

It is interesting to know that the 1857 episode is still popular in northern India's predominantly dalit villages. The rebellion was concentrated in the north Indian Gangetic belt beginning from Delhi to Bengal. It began in Meerut on May 10 after news spread that the garrisons in Delhi had revolted and expelled the British. This acted as a catalyst that saw a great deal of activity on the part of the civil population. It soon spread to other parts of UP. On May 20 it started in Aligarh, on May 23 in Etawah and Mainpuri and May 27 in Etah [Mukherjee 2001: 65]. In this way it moved to other parts of UP and Bihar like Kanpur, Awadh, Benaras, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Bahraich, Sitapur, Ghazipur, Sultanpur, western Bihar and finally to Bengal. In upper India it was more in the form of a turbulent agrarian upheaval gathering together a wide variety of discontents. The rebellion had not yet taken the form of an organised movement against the British but it commanded extensive popular

support, especially in Awadh, throughout the North-Western Provinces and western Bihar. Sepoy discontent was an essential ingredient of the rebellion but the mutiny derived its strength from the civil population [Metcalf 1990: 60]. Peasants, political sadhus [Pinch 1996: 9], local kings and most importantly the conservative sections of society, who had suffered greatly under the British rule, were united in fighting colonialism. The British government put up a stiff resistance to the rebellion. Their retribution was harsh and deadly. Village after village was burnt or felled with cannon balls to squash the rebellion. Thousands of rebels were hanged from the gallows and an equally large number were hanged from trees as instant punishment. Although the rebellion ultimately failed it helped develop a consciousness about colonialism within the people, especially of the Awadh region of UP where the rebellion was most intense. It could also be said to be the beginning of a renaissance in the Hindi-speaking region of India. The rebellion left a deep imprint in the minds of the common people that was very different from the scanty recorded history of that period. Recorded history only told the stories of rich feudal landlords, and kings and queens like Rani Laxmibai and Tatya Tope. The stories of unsung heroes who played their role behind the curtains of written history were circulated only in oral history in rural north India. This fact gave a lot of freedom to dalit intellectuals to pick out their own heroes of the rebellion and build up their images as dalit icons. These icons were then used to construct the identity of grassroots dalits who had no heroes or icons to identify with. The image building of these heroes of the rebellion later led to their deification by the dalits living in regions to which the heroes belonged.

III DALITS AND MEMORIES OF 1857

The dalits have an emotional link with the 1857 war of independence for they believe that it was initiated by them. They claim that the soldier's revolt by the mostly dalit Indian soldiers in the British army that took place in Jhansi in 1857, snowballed into the war of independence. It was a war of independence since the dalits were fighting for their motherland rather than seeking power. The war was led by Bhau Bakshi and

Puran Kori and with them was Jhalkaribai who fought bravely against the British for the sake of her motherland [Dinkar 1990: 62]. The dalit narrative of the “first” freedom struggle is filled with stories about brave women martyrs belonging to suppressed communities like Jhalkaribai, Avantibai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi [Ibid: 27]. According to them, the 1857 war of independence, which the elites claim was started by Mangal Pandey, was actually inspired by Matadin Bhangi. The story is narrated in such a manner that Matadin Bhangi emerges as the source of inspiration for the revolt.

Their narrative is as follows:

There was a factory in Barrackpore where cartridges were manufactured. Many of the workers of this factory belonged to the untouchable communities. One day one of the workers felt thirsty. He asked a soldier for a mug of water. That soldier was Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey, a brahmin, refused him water because the worker was an untouchable. This was very humiliating for the worker. He retaliated to the brahmin soldier saying, “Bara awa hai brahaman ka beta. Jin kartuson ka tum upayog karat ho, unpar gaaye or suar ki charbi lagawal jaat hai, jinhe tum apan daatun se torkar banduk mein bharat ho. O samay torihar jati aur dharam kahan jawat. Dhikkar tumhare is brahmanatwa ka” [You claim to be a highly respectable brahmin, but the cartridges which you bite with your teeth and insert in your guns, are all rubbed with the fat of cows and pigs. What happens to your caste and religion then? Curse on your brahminism]

Hearing this soldier was taken by surprise. That untouchable was none other than Matadin Bhangi, who opened the eyes of the Indian soldier and ignited the first spark of India’s independence in the cantonment. The words of Matadin Bhangi spread like wildfire through the cantonment. Very soon the torch of independence was lighted. On the morning of March 1, 1857, Mangal Pandey broke the line during the parade. Accusing the British of spoiling their religious sentiments, he started firing indiscriminately at them. This was the moment when the first battle lines against the British were drawn. Mangal Pandey was arrested in an injured condition. He was court-martialed, and in 1857 hanged from the gallows before all the soldiers. Mangal Pandey’s sacrifice became an inspiration for all the soldiers. On May 10, 1857, the floodgates of the independence movement burst in Barrackpore in which many brave sons of India became martyrs. In the chargesheet that was made, the first name was that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested. All the

arrested revolutionaries were court-martialed. Matadin was charged for treason against the British [Dinkar op cit: 37].

Nath (1998) in his book *1857 Ki Kranti Ka Janak: Nagvanshi-Bhangi Matadin Hela* also narrates a similar story in which Matadin Bhangi has been claimed to be the father ('janak') of the 1857 rebellion. In these narratives, Matadin Bhangi is presented as the moving force behind the 1857 revolt. They show how the forward classes refused to hand a glass of water to the untouchables although they bit cartridges greased with beef fat. Thus, these narratives, along with a description of the nationalist movement, questions the hierarchical structure of the Indian society. The rigid structure in which the untouchables are not allowed to go near the forward castes because of their low birth and ritual "dirtiness" has been strongly criticised. To prove the historicity of this event, a book written by one Shri Acharya Bhagwan Deb called *The Immortal Revolutionaries of India*, has been quoted by Dinkar [Dinkar op cit: 38].

The memory of Matadin Bhangi and his contribution to the nationalist movement is celebrated in a number of ways by the dalits. Many songs have been composed in his honour that are sung in rallies and functions, both cultural and political. Plays are staged at commemorative functions held in his honour in towns and villages. Special issues of magazines are brought out with articles by eminent writers highlighting his contributions. A fortnightly newspaper *Dalit Kesri* published a special issue on the 1857 revolt³ in which the lead article was on Matadin Bhangi. *Anarya Bharat*, another dalit newspaper that is published from Mainpuri in UP, brought out a special feature on the contribution of dalits to the 1857 revolt. In all these publications they projected Matadin Bhangi as a pioneer of the "First War of Indian Independence". *Himayati*, a dalit literary magazine, in its May 1996 issue celebrating the memory of 1857 published a special feature and lead article on the contribution of Matadin Bhangi. Sohanpal Sumanakshar wrote very strongly in the same issue that the first person who sowed the seed of the 1857 revolution was Matadin Bhangi but unfortunately historians have forgotten his contribution.⁴

In this manner, the elite nationalist history has been subverted by the dalits in their favour. Kuar Singh, Tatya Tope and Nana Saheb do not figure in the dalit narrative of the 1857

freedom struggle. The people who figure are Jhalkaribai, Uda Devi, Avantibai, Mahaviridevi, Pannadhai, Chetram Jatav, Ballu Mehtar, Banke Chamar and Vira Pasi, who were born in the lower stratas of society. Although the elite nationalist heroes are not negated, they are completely ignored. Their emphasis is on the sacrifice of the dalit martyrs for the nation in spite of their low birth and poor socio-economic status. Their brave confrontation with the British has also been highlighted. The story of Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav has been described in the following manner:

Although the dalits were born in the lowest caste of the Indian caste hierarchy and suffered great hardship because of their poor socio-economic status, they never sold themselves for their country. No one can accuse a single dalit of doing so. Whenever the need arose, they sacrificed their lives for their motherland. Among the brave sons of the country, the names of Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav are written in shining letters. As soon as the news of the Barrackpore revolution reached the people, a mob of revolutionaries took to the streets. Phillips, who was an officer of the Eta district, tried to control the mob. On May 26, 1857, in the Soro region of Eta district, Chetram Jatav and Balluram Mehtar joined into the Barrackpore revolution without caring for their lives. In this revolution, Sadashiv Mehre, Chaturbhuj Vaish, etc, were also present. Chetram Jatav and Balluram, who were the moving forces behind the revolution, were tied to trees and shot. The rest were hanged from trees in the Kasganj area [Dinkar op cit: 56].

The bravery of the martyr Banke Chamar is also described. He lived in village Kuarpur, Macchli Shahar, district Jaunpur. When the revolution failed, the British declared Banke Chamar and 18 of his associates as 'baghi' (revolutionaries). Banke Chamar was ordered to be hanged after being arrested. Thus this brave revolutionary laid down his life for the country [Dinkar op cit: 59].

Amar Shaheed Vira Pasi is another dalit who is remembered as a brave warrior in the dalit narrative. He was a security guard of Raja Beni Madhav Singh of Murar Mau, in Rae Bareli, Uttar Pradesh. Raja Beni Madhav Singh was arrested for taking part in the revolt. One night, Vira Pasi entered the prison and helped the king escape. This was a big insult to the British administration. They decided to capture Vira Pasi dead or alive, and placed a reward of Rs 50,000 on his head. However, they were unable to capture him [Dinkar op cit: 64].

Another story narrated about their role in the 1857 movement is situated in the village Magarwara, about 10 kilometres from Unnao on the Lucknow highway. They claim that on July 20, 1857 a small battalion of the British army under the leadership of Henry Havelock was passing through Magarwara to help another battalion that had got stuck in the residency. Nearly 2,000 pasis came out of their hamlets and pelted the battalion with stones, which forced them to return to Kanpur cantonment. On August 4, 1857 the same battalion came to the village, this time with a lot of preparations. When the pasis of Magarwara tried to stop them from moving forward a battle ensued and nearly 2,000 pasis were killed [Pasi 1998: 34].

Yet another story narrated by the pasis is situated in village Bani on the banks of the river Sai, close to Magarwara. This region consisted of many small pasi hamlets. When the British army passed by this highway it faced a stiff resistance from the pasis. Angered by this, the British officers asked the pasis to vacate the area within five minutes. When they refused, the British announced that they would blow up the hamlets with cannons. This caused great alarm, they did try to escape but in spite of this many pasis were killed in the cannon firing. The British found this region very salubrious and decided to build a fort where their soldiers, who had faced stiff resistance by the pasis after leaving Kanpur cantonment, could rest and restore their vigour. This story is a part of the collective memory and oral tradition of the pasis of that region and is often presented in plays and songs. The song is:

Bani bani kati bani, ban ke bigri bani
 Angrezon ke tope se urhi, phir bani rahi bani.
 (The village Bani was made, then destroyed,
 again made and again destroyed;
 the cannon balls of the British blew it apart,
 then Bani was once again made and remained Bani.)

The story is further narrated that the next day general Havelock once again moved forward with his troops to free the soldiers trapped in the residency. Once again he had to face the wrath of Indian freedom fighters, this time at the Alambagh Bhavya Bhawan. Many soldiers, both Indian and British lost their lives in this battle. When the general reached Dilkushabagh, he again had to fight against the Indian rebels. These

incidents took a toll on British soldiers and drained the energy of Havelock. He fell ill and finally succumbed to his illness on November 24, 1857. He was buried at the British Cemetery in Alambagh [Pasi op cit: 36]. This story is recorded in a documentation of the contributions of the pasis in the freedom struggle of the country, from where it is once again transmitted to the oral memory of the dalits.

Another story that is narrated in glowing terms is about the husband of Udadevi, Makka Pasi who, like his wife, laid down his life in the revolt. The incident took place on June 10, 1857, when a small battalion of British soldiers under the leadership of Henry Lawrence was passing through Barabanki on their way to Chinhat from Awadh. At village Chinhat, Makka Pasi gathered an army of 200 pasis and killed many British soldiers. Seeing a danger in him, Lawrence shot Makka Pasi to stop him from killing more soldiers. In pasi hagiography it is claimed that Udadevi and Makka Pasi are the only couple in world history where both the partners have become martyrs. This couple elevated the glory of not just the pasi community but the entire country [Pasi 2005: 90-91].

IV

NARRATIVE, IDENTITY AND SEARCH OF LOCATION

The dalits, through their narratives of 1857, have not only tried to establish their own heroes, but also tried to dethrone the existing high-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives. The narratives portray the high castes as traitors, conspirators, and dishonest to their motherland. Through these narratives, they also want to prove that the upper castes, by capturing history and the political scene now appear as the most nationalist of communities.

Through the story of Jhalkaribai also, who was said to have fought alongside (Rani) Laxmi Bai, the dalits want to prove that the queen was hungry for power. She did not want to revolt against the British. It was only under the influence of Jhalkaribai that she agreed to do so. At the end of the 1857 struggle, she did not become a martyr but hid herself in the estate of Pratapgarh.⁵

The historicity of these narratives is questionable but the politics behind the creation and narration of these stories is to

dethrone the established heroes of the mainstream narratives. A three-dimensional discursive strategy was adopted to achieve this aim. The first is to make allegations about the distortion of mainstream writings about the events of 1857. The second is to establish their own heroes as freedom fighters. The third is to prove that zamindars, feudal lords, and the wealthy classes of the society were conspirators aiding the British. The educated Indian intelligentsia is also claimed to be conspirators aiding the British. In the preface of his booklet *Sepoy Mutiny 1857-58: An Indian Perfidy*, A K Biswas (1997:22), a dalit from West Bengal who later became an IAS officer, wrote:

The Indian history has been subjected to calculated distortion at the hands of educated Indians. Instances are galore in many walks of life. The Sepoy Mutiny (1857-58) though not even two centuries old and though there is vast mass of contemporary literature, has suffered the same mindless perversion, truth has been swept under the carpet. In other words, it has not been allowed to come to the light. The Sepoy Mutiny is hailed today universally as the first war of Indian independence when the mutineers unfurled the banner of revolt against a mighty empire. The contemporary literature, however, gives a very different, rather baffling, picture, the sepoys have been held therein as seditious, perfidious, evil and wrong doers, etc. They were condemned in strongest terms by Indian journalists...The feudal class, on the other hand lent strong moral and material support to the imperial forces which crushed the uprising. The glaring contradiction does not find any mention in the textbooks of history of our times for reasons not far to seek, nor is it known to the generation of the day.

These narratives of the past are being used by the dalits to acquire power in the ongoing social struggle. They are also attempting to reshape the fractured and competing pasts from the present and acquire a position of authority for all the dalit castes. This process of remaking the past is based on their contemporary socio-political and cultural experience of discrimination which they face in their everyday lives. They link their experiences of recent times with their remote past and authenticate the latter by establishing their historicity. Invention of history for the dalits is thus a process of acquiring legitimacy for their identity by establishing the oldness of the tradition of sacrifice by their community for the nation and society. In this sense one can propose that the past can be an authority but the

nature of this authority is seen as shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention.

V

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORIES AND POLITICS OF FUTURE

Why is it important for the dalits to link themselves with the 1857 war of independence and why are the icons related with this incident more important than those of other incidents? Why is 1857 so important for them? The reason may be that the events around this period are not well documented, so the dalits find plenty of space to invent their history and posit their leaders in them. To the common people especially the dalits, the 1857 revolt is highly romantic with a number of local heroic characters who fought valiantly against the British using indigenous weapons. This notion provides the opportunity to create heroes belonging to their community with whom they can identify. The authenticity of these heroes is debatable but they have the power to stir the imagination of people. The events that took place in the 20th century on the other hand are very well documented since the leaders of that period tried to build up a unified homogeneous story of India's independence. This gave little space to the dalits since the story is dominated by upper-caste leaders whom they had to follow. It is true that many lower castes lost their lives in the non-cooperation, Quit India and other such movements but the glory went to the upper-caste leaders who had organised them.

The 1857 movement was mainly confined to the northern part of India, which made it easier for the dalits of this region in search for heroes, to invent and situate their heroes in places with heavy concentration of lower castes like Awadh, Bundelkhand and Bhojpur. The memory of these events are not just part of dalit memory but also a part of the broader collective memory of the region that is reflected in the songs, plays and other mediums of popular culture. This fact enabled the dalits to invent their heroes and histories who could become both local heroes and identity markers for the entire community in its everyday struggle for dignity and self-respect. The dalit leaders understood that it was of paramount importance to link themselves with the nationalist narrative and assert their role in the

freedom struggle. However they found it difficult to find space in the main phase of the freedom movement since in the period when the struggle for dalit uplift picked up momentum, their leader B R Ambedkar had developed a rift with Gandhi, the most important leader of this phase. Thus there was no option but to search for their heroes in the 1857 revolution so as not to antagonise the state, which legitimised the nationalist narrative. Since one of the catalysts for the emergence of a dalit nationalist narrative was the dialogue with the state, they could not afford to ignore it. They could neither negate Ambedkar and his narrative of the nationalist movement nor the dominant nationalist narrative which is projected as the foundation of the present state. The need to strike a balance between the two led the dalits to search for their own heroes within the nationalist narrative. And the event which provided them the space to do so was the 1857 struggle.

Another reason why dalits found it crucial to link themselves with the 1857 struggle was to counter the allegations made by some intellectuals associated with the BJP that the dalits were anti-national. According to these intellectuals, Ambedkar was against the mainstream nationalist movement led by Gandhi and often supported the British. These ideologues try to belittle dalits by stating that they conquered India for the British – the dusadhs and baheliyas fought for Lord Clive in the Battle of Plassey in 1757.⁶ In a bid to oppose the efforts of the dalits to write their own history and rupture the mainstream nationalist narrative, the All India History Compilation Project, formed by the RSS for propagating history based on the RSS ideology held a convention between July 17 and 19, 1999 in Allahabad. In this convention the custodian Moreshwar Neelkanth Pingale opined that writing the history of sudras, 'gwalas' and tribals created hatred among sections of society and caused problems for an Indianised social life.⁷ In reaction to statements like these, the dalits were compelled to assert their role in the 1857 revolt. They stated that their association with 1857 gave them an exalted position in the history of India's nation-building. That there was a difference in opinion among the members of the BJP-RSS was obvious when the governor of UP Suraj Bhan, in the same convention rebuked those attempting to deny the role of dalits in the freedom struggle and said that they had contributed to the

greatest possible extent in the movement for independence. He added that but for Valmiki, the writer of *Ramayana* who belonged to a dalit community, no one would have known about Rama and Sita. He also mentioned the name of Jhalkaribai who in the guise of Rani of Jhansi, fought valiantly against the British in the first war of independence.⁸

VI

MULTIPLE LOCATIONS AND COMPETING POLITICS

From a study of the scattered information available and narratives that appear in the folk tales and folk lore of the lower castes it is evident that many people of these castes were actively involved in 1857. In fact the massive scale on which the rebellion was launched could not have been possible without the participation of these castes, but it is disheartening to note that their contribution has neither been documented nor acknowledged in Indian history writing.

Whatever little mention there is of the role of the lower castes, it is only as servants of kings, feudal landlords and zamindars, which has either negated their contribution or marginalised them from the history of the rebellion [Rai 2005]. It is true that the story of Jhalkaribai is linked with that of Laxmibai and Udaddevi's with that of Begum Hazrat Mahal, but at a time when most of the kings and landlords were joining forces with the British to seek benefits from them, it is imperative to evaluate the roles of these brave lower caste warriors in the right historical context. From these examples it appears that in the rebellion against the British the dalits played a sterling role along with the upper caste kings, queens and landlords. In addition dalit historians cite many examples of lower caste heroes who were not associated with any upper caste king or queen but fought against the British in their own capacity [Dinkar op cit]. Many extreme Ambedkarite and leftist journalists and scholars who are trying to link the rebellion with dissatisfied feudal lords, kings, soldiers and peasants are trying to negate the role of dalits in it [Kumar 2002: 12]. Dalit intellectuals supported by BSP, which is trying to mobilise grassroot dalits using local heroes, histories, myths and legends found a wealth of resources in the oral history of the regions of

UP where several events of the 1857 occurred [Narayan 2006]. The political strategy of the party is to tell and retell the stories of these heroes, build memorials and organise celebrations around their stories repeatedly to build a collective memory in the psyche of the people. The stories are narrated in such a manner that the dalits play the more significant role. Several books like *Swatantrata Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan* [Dinkar 1990], *Jhoothi Azadi* [Madan 1987], *Pasi Samaj ka Swatantrata mein Yogdan* [Pasi 1998], *Dalit Dastavej* [Vidrohi 1989] and so on, document the contributions of various dalit heroes in the 1857 rebellion. These narratives help them to claim a respectable place in the contemporary process of nation-building and a lion's share in state-sponsored development projects and other democratic benefits. By repeatedly narrating their role in the nation-making process the marginalised communities put forward a moral logic in favour of reservations and social justice for themselves. They contend that though they had shed their blood and sweat for building of this nation and in spite of their historical role in its development, the state has not helped them to recover from their social, cultural and economic losses. Through these narratives they assert that their role in the recorded history of nation-making has not been sufficiently acknowledged and their contribution in the freedom struggle has been completely ignored [Dinkar op cit: 23].

Dalit politicians and dalit intellectuals are using history, memories and icons of 1857 in their discourses in various ways. First, when caste conferences are organised as a step towards identity construction, they publish posters and handbills in which the contribution of their caste heroes in the 1857 struggle is mentioned.⁹ Second, they justify their demands from the state as reward for their role in the 1857 movement.¹⁰ Third, during election campaigns the BSP leaders highlight the contribution of those heroes of the 1857 movement who belong to the caste which they are addressing. Fourth, many castes, in their mass struggle against the prejudices harboured by the state publish posters and pamphlets in which they mention their role in the 1857 freedom struggle. Many castes are still considered criminal tribes on the basis of old colonial acts that continue to be followed by the police although they have now been abolished. Such castes say that, when the upper castes were busy

collaborating with the British to earn titles of Rai Bahadur and grabbing land that belonged to dalit ancestors, they (the dalits) were fighting against the British. In anger, the British branded them as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribe Acts of 1871, 1896, 1901-02, 1909, 1911, 1913-14, 1919 and 1924. Although these tribes have now been denotified, whenever a criminal activity takes place, the police, acting on preconceived notions, first arrests members of these tribes [Dinkar op cit]. As a protest against this kind of state atrocities, these communities continue to organise protests and publish posters and handbills in which they mention their role in the 1857 movement.

Thus in very many ways the memory of 1857 is still alive in the collective psyche of the dalits which inspires them in their struggle against the everyday social, economic and political exclusion and discrimination that they face.

NOTES

- 1 Field diary, Bidesia project, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Sciences Institute, 2005.
- 2 Field diary, Bidesia, ibid.
- 3 *Dalit Kesari*, Allahabad, June 14-30, 1990.
- 4 Sumanshankar, *Himayati*, May 1996 issue.
- 5 S L Baudh *Majhi Janata*, November 1-8, 2001, Kanpur, pp 3-4.
- 6 *Asian Age*, Calcutta, December 24-31, 1995 and January 7, 1996.
- 7 *Hindustan*, Lucknow, July 18, p 3.
- 8 *Hindustan*, Lucknow, July 18, p 3.
- 9 Pamphlets published on the occasion of Nishad, Bind, Kashyap, Lodh Ekta Sammelan, February 23, 1997, Allahabad.
- 10 Pamphlets of nishad caste published during its conference for demanding their traditional rights on water and sand, November 10-11, 1979.

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Dalit ‘Viranganas’ and Reinvention of 1857

Charu Gupta

THE past three decades particularly have seen a flourishing of popular dalit literature, pamphlets and booklets, which have emerged as a critical resource for deeper insights into dalit politics and identity. Dalits themselves are disentangling received knowledge from the apparatus of control. This literature brings fresh hope, as it is believed that now dalits are in charge of their own images and narratives, witness to and participants in their own experience. They are rescuing dalit culture from degeneration and stereotypes, and bringing in a new dalit aesthetic. They are not the “Other”, and are themselves articulating critical questions of choice and difference.

Most of this literature is mass produced in thousands, usually in the form of thin pamphlets. It is sold in large quantities through small ad hoc stalls put up at various public rallies, conglomerations and melas of dalits, on pavements, and through dalit presses and publishers, reaching through such commercial networks into a large number of dalit households. Most of the authors are not known much or well established. There is a technical lack of sophistication in the production of these pamphlets, and they are usually thin, reproduced with many editions, priced very cheaply at approximately between Rs 2 and Rs 50, printed on cheap paper, through private dalit presses. They are written in simple colloquial Hindi, and encompass various literary genres.¹

While covering a huge range, from works by and on Ambedkar, status of dalits and atrocities on them, reservations, conversions, dalit literary writings, theatre and songs, what interests me here are the representations of nationalist struggle in this literature. It has been argued that dalits have had an ambivalent relationship with both Indian nationalism and colonialism, often

contradictory with the views of dominant Hindu communities. Some dalit intellectuals argue that the British liberated the dalit masses from the oppressions of Hindu society, and that British rule was good for the dalits. In Uttar Pradesh, many of the activists within the dalit movement had articulated similar ideas as early as the 1920s. For example, the Adi-Hindu movement in the 1920s and 1930s and its leaders were against the Congress and the national movement, and were pro-British. However, in post-independent India, given the imperative political assertions by the dalits, there has been a need felt to assert the nationalist credentials of the dalits and the positive role they played in the freedom struggle. Thus dalit histories have come out with copious volumes on their contribution and role in the independence movement, digging out hitherto ignored accounts.² The social constructions of the role played by dalits in the struggle for India's freedom have thus been changed by the dalits themselves in tandem with changing social and political conditions in specific historical moments within dalit communities. What is significant, however, is that whether dalits argue for an anti-nationalist or a pro-nationalist stance in the colonial period, their agendas and articulations are substantially different, departing from and challenging conventional nationalists and mainstream historians of the period. Dalit perspectives on their own histories offer a dramatically different account from the received wisdoms taught in most Indian universities.

Promoting alternative accounts of role of dalits in the freedom struggle, this literature portrays itself as the real and comprehensive truth. It catalogues their enormous sacrifices and enumerates the many occasions on which dalits rose in defence of the nation. These stories are endlessly repeated in pamphlets after pamphlets, though they have not found their way in canonised/mainstream history. What is being proposed by dalit writers here is the concreteness and the almost palpable truth of this history.³ This popular dalit literature can be seen to represent alternative and dissident voices, coexisting with and simultaneously challenging hegemonic ideologies. It is a counterpoint to hegemony.⁴ It also reflects Bakhtin's notions of dialogics and heteroglossia,⁵ and Stuart Hall's concept of "oppositional" decoding, challenging "dominant-hegemonic" and "negotiated" reading positions.⁶

1857 REVOLT, CONVENTIONAL HISTORIES AND DALIT RETELLINGS

The revolt of 1857 figures in a major way in the narratives of popular dalit histories, where a completely alternative account of the revolt emerges, converging histories, myths, realities and retelling of the pasts. The outbreak of 1857 has been regarded as a memorable episode in Indian history. It was in a sense one of the first formidable revolt that had broken out against foreign domination. To prove the nationalist credentials of dalits, their popular histories have thus completely transformed 1857.

Before going into these narratives let us briefly examine conventional and standardised histories of the revolt. Various strands of historiography largely seem to converge, particularly on the question of the caste character of the revolt. According to nationalist historians like S B Chaudhuri, Tara Chand and R C Mazumdar, the social composition of 1857 consisted of the ruling class and the traditional elite of the society, who were the "natural leaders" of the revolt. The elitist character of the revolt is highlighted by referring to it as a general movement of the Muslims and the Hindus-princes, landholders, soldiers, scholars and theologians.⁷ Marxist scholars seem to fall within the same paradigm where they basically see the revolt as a last attempt of the elite medieval order to halt the process of its dissolution and recover its lost status. Thomas R Metcalf too emphasises that it was not merely a mutiny nor a war of independence. For him 1857 was "a traditionalist movement in which those who had the most to lose in the new sought the restoration of the old pre-British order".⁸ In his significant work, Eric Stokes, while highlighting the local background of the upsurge, also argues that it was the fear of the loss of an upper caste status due to the use of fat-greased cartridges that precipitated the uprising. He shows how ashraf Muslims, brahmins and rajputs had secured a near monopoly over entry into the Bengal Army and they were afraid of a loss to their status.⁹ Many other contemporary accounts too emphasise the hurt and the fears of pollution felt by upper caste Hindus as an important reason for the revolt. How do dalit histories of 1857 fit in with these accounts? The purity/pollution ties of the upper castes and classes, linked with the crossing of seas or biting of the flesh of the cow or the pig, do not fit in with dalits. There have been other scholars who have emphasised the lower caste

base of the revolt as well. Thus, for example, Rudrangshu Mukherjee emphasises the mutual dependence between peasantry and talukdars, which provided the basis for common and united action at this tumultuous juncture. He thus links the seemingly disjointed and contradictory realms of the elite and the common masses.¹⁰ Gautam Bhadra also highlights the common leaders of the revolt.¹¹ However, even these scholars, in spite of their best intentions, do not explicitly focus on dalits and even less so on women. As Bhadra says, “In all these representations what has been missed out is the ordinary rebel, *his* role and *his* perception of alien rule and contemporary crisis”¹² (emphasis in original).

With the rise of the dalit movement and literature in north India, the history of 1857 however has been completely inverted, with many histories of it being rewritten, particularly since the 1960s.¹³ Contemporary dalit perceptions and compositions of 1857 are very different from scholarly historical studies on the subject, or even constructed “popular” perceptions, and represent the historical consciousness of the revolt in the public memory of the dalits. The pamphlets and books on dalit histories of 1857 – which may also be described as unofficial dalit histories of colonial India – combine myths, memories and histories, depicting dalit versions of the revolt. Dalit writers are attempting here to look upon the mutiny as part of their struggle for freedom. The revolt has taken on the character of a dalit resistance, where alternative dalit heroes are represented as the real symbols of 1857 in dalit popular nationalist consciousness. The rebel dalit heroes – some constructed, some exaggerated, some “discovered” – have become heroes fighting for a free India. In these accounts, the armies of soldiers against British consist largely of dalits. New dalit histories argue that the dalits had nothing much to lose in pre-British times, as their condition had been miserable even then. So it was actually dalits who fought for independence in 1857, while the upper caste Hindus and Indian rulers only fought to restore their rule. The focus of this literature is no longer on the sepoys or the greased cartridges, but on dalits groaning under foreign oppression. As the famous dalit poet Bihari Lal Harit says regarding 1857:

nai, dhobi, kurmi, kachchi/bharbhuge bhaat kumhaar lare.
Lare khak rub mochi dhanak/sab daliton ke parivar lare.

(Barbers, washermen, kurmis, gardeners, grain-parchers, bards and potters fought. Cobblers rolling in dust and cotton-carders fought. All dalit families fought.)¹⁴

Dalit narratives of 1857 deploy an impassioned language, and are written usually by dalit men who are not trained historians. These writers are inspired by altogether different sentiments, and their writings reveal the inner dynamics of dalit politics as well. They are writing history with a mission by claiming a past and using it for the furtherance of their future. One of their purposes in writing inspirational histories of this kind is to stimulate dalit nationalism, dalit patriotic sentiment, and their pride. They are rewriting history to provide dignity to the dalits.¹⁵ Present day feelings are ascribed to dalit heroes of 1857, and they are seen as teaching a moral lesson that the dalits of today need to emulate the heroic deed of their past heroes, and fight for their rights today as well. In the dalit literature, 1857 has become the Caesar of India, which is more powerful when dead than alive. It has got inscribed as a heroic popular uprising fought by the lowly, a symbol of challenge to the British power by the dalits. It entailed united dalit activism and sacrifice of enormous numbers. Its history is constantly being reshaped in the present socio-cultural and political context. It has an inspirational quality, an effective conviction, which signifies a present political importance.

1857 has also become a marker for the dalits to prove their nationalist credentials, and claim their own space in the freedom struggle and the history of a nation in the making. By this, dalits also seek to win acceptance from the wider society by creating and legitimising a space for themselves within the nationalist narratives.¹⁶ However, these histories are not just reinventions of the past or inspirational histories. They also reveal a deep impassioned plea to recognise the unsung heroes of the revolt, who were often illiterate and left no written records. Folksongs, oral narratives and myths also thus become the basis of these accounts. As says one:

*yatra-tatra sarvatra milegi, unki gaatha ki charcha.
kintu upekshit veervaron ka – kabhi nahin chapta parcha.*

(Here, there and everywhere, you will find discussions on their deeds, but the scorned [dalit] heroes are never written about in papers.)¹⁷

However, this literature has not found its way into the mainstream, conventional and canonised historical narratives of

1857, be it school textbooks, restructured curricula or scholarly works. The reasons for this may be camouflaged in a language about "quality", authenticity and written historical records. Dalit literature on 1857 may be seen as "inferior", sensational, mimetic and unintellectual, though moving and passionate. The cannon fodder of 1857 history has thus kept dalit versions of 1857 away from the loci of authority – university departments, literary associations and syllabi. Dalit literature on 1857 occupies a different public-political domain and presents an alternate form of knowledge. The language and vocabulary deployed in dalit literature on 1857 stresses the need for dalitisation of history and to examine the dalit leaders of the revolt. Dalits claim that reinventing 1857 from a dalit perspective is imperative in order to represent reality. While appropriating the past, dalit writers are simultaneously questioning the blurred presentations and partial/prejudiced histories of historians, arguing that dalit heroes of the revolt have been completely erased by them. They argue that most historians implicitly hold their high caste biases when writing histories of 1857.¹⁸

DALIT 'VIRANGANAS' OF 1857

A chief feature of these popular dalit histories of 1857 is the way dalit women get represented in them. Here myths about dalit viranganas (heroic women) are being reinvented as a potent symbol for identity formation and as a critical part of a movement to define political and social positioning of dalits. Narratives of dalit viranganas abound, with a long list of them littering the Indian past. These women are ascribed particularly heroic roles. In fact, dalit female icons, engaged in radical armed struggles, far outnumber dalit men in 1857. These writings invoke political and public dalit memories, where women like Jhalkari Bai of the kori caste, Uda Devi, a pasi, Avanti Bai, a lodhi, Mahabiri Devi, a bhangi and Asha Devi, a gurjari, all stated to be involved in the 1857 revolt, have become the symbols of bravery of particular dalit castes and ultimately of all dalits.¹⁹

Representing the dalit woman in certain modes in 1857 also indicates ways in which pasts are remembered and retailed, and the relationships of such pasts to people's sense of belonging. As has been remarked, representation can pose afresh the

relationship between memory, myth and history, oral and written, transmitted and inscribed, stereotypicality and lived history.²⁰ Reading the histories of dalit women viranganas of 1857 through the lens of representation adds important dimensions to our understanding of it, while also revealing tensions between the pedagogical and the performative, the rhetoric and the reality. Foucault has argued that all representations are by their very nature insidious instruments of surveillance, oppression and control – both tools and effects of power. However, if we argue that representations of dalit women are constructed only to support dominant modes of ideology, and that their aim is ultimately coercive, then how can we use this space also for confrontation? Does representation have the scope of carving out more contingent, varied and flexible modes of resistances?²¹ Within the field of representation, counter-images can emerge, challenging hegemonic images.

In India, there have been a significant number of studies concerned with the representations of high caste, middle class women, particularly of the colonial period.²² My own earlier work had focused on this.²³ While significant in their own right, there is an implicit implication in these works that since dalit women fall within the category of "women", their representation need not be singled out for a separate study. Thus, portrayal of dalit women of the colonial period as a major area of feminist scholarly examination has remained negligible and on the fringes. Dalit literature on 1857 provides us a significant moment to examine alternative representations of dalit women. It can be an important source of insight into gender politics from a dalit perspective and a site of struggle over meanings. While highlighting the centrality of these dalit viranganas in the symbolic constitution of dalit identity, this literature simultaneously reveals a world turned upside down, challenging textual, academic and historical narratives of 1857. It further shows how resistance to dominant discourses about dalit women has been coded and lived by various groups of dalits within dalit communities at different historical moments. Dalit viranganas emerge here as not only visible, but as conspicuous and central characters, and objects of attention and adulation.

Thus for example, to take the case of Jhalkari Bai, there has been a proliferation of a vast number of popular Hindi tracts,

written by various authors, and cultural invocations on her, including comics, poems, plays, novels, biographies, ‘nautankis’,²⁴ and even magazines and organisations in her name. To name just a few, there is the comic *Jhalkari Bai*; poems variously titled *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Kavya*, *Jhansi ki Sherni*: *Virangana Jhalkari Bai ka Jeevan Charitra* and *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Mahakavya*; plays and nautankis called *Virangana Jhalkari Bai and Achhut Virangana Nautanki*; novels and biographies like *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* and *Achhut Virangana*; and a magazine called *Jhalkari Sandesh*, published from Agra.²⁵ Various dalit magazines have published articles on her.²⁶ Similarly, on Uda Devi, there are poems, plays, stories and magazines penned and narrated on various occasions.²⁷

The various narratives go something like this. Jhalkari Bai is depicted as an ‘amar shaheed’ (immortal martyr) of 1857, belonging to the kori caste. Jhalkari Bai hailed from Jhansi. Her husband Puran Kori was an ordinary soldier in the kingdom of raja Gangadhar Rao. Jhalkari Bai is depicted as an ideal woman, occasionally helping her husband in his traditional occupation of cloth weaving, and also sometimes accompanying him to the royal palace. She is stated to be brave since her childhood and further got training from her husband in archery, wrestling, horse-riding and shooting. Her face and body structure is said to resemble Lakshmibai exactly. Slowly Jhalkari Bai and Lakshmibai become friends. Jhalkari was entrusted with the charge of leading the women’s wing of the army, known as the “Durga Dal”. When the 1857 revolt began, the rulers were mostly interested in just saving their thrones and it was not a freedom struggle for them. It was dalits who made it a freedom struggle. When the British besieged the fort of Jhansi, Jhalkari Bai fought fiercely. She urged Rani Lakshmibai to escape from the palace and instead she herself took on the guise of the Rani and led the movement from Dantiya gate and Bhandari gate to Unnao gate. Her husband died while fighting with the British and when Jhalkari Bai heard this, she became a “wounded tigress”. She killed many British, and managed to hoodwink them for a long time, before they discovered her true identity.²⁸ According to some versions, suddenly many bullets hit her, and she died.²⁹ Some state that she was set free, lived till 1890 and became a legend of her time.³⁰

Uda Devi is said to have been born in the village Ujriaon of Lucknow. She was also known as Jagrani and was married to Makka Pasi. She became an associate of Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Uda formed a women's army, with herself as the commander. Her husband became a martyr in the battle at Chinhat. Uda decided to take revenge. When the British attacked Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow under Campbell, he was faced with an army of dalit women:

*koi unko habsin kehta, koi kehta neech achchut.
abla koi unhein batlaye, koi kahe unhe majboot.*

(Some called them black African women, some untouchable. Some called them weak, others strong.)³¹

It is significant here that even W Gordon-Alexander's account of the storming of Sikandar Bagh by British troops states:

In addition...there were...even a few amazon negresses, amongst the slain. These amazons having no religious prejudices against the use of greased cartridges, whether of pigs' or other animal fat, although doubtless professed Muhammadans, were armed with rifles, while the Hindu and Muhammadan East Indian rebels were all armed with musket; they fought like wild cats, and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected.³²

Uda Devi was one of them, who is said to have climbed over a 'pipal' tree and shot dead, according to some accounts 32 and some 36, British soldiers. One soldier spotted someone in the tree and shot the person dead, and only then it was discovered that she was a woman. Realising her brave feat, even British officers like Campbell bowed their heads over her dead body in respect.³³

Asha Devi Gurjari is portrayed as a leader to a large number of young girls and women and it is stated that on May 8, 1857, she along with a large number of other women like Valmiki Mahaviri Devi, Rahimi Gurjari, Bhagwani Devi, Bhagwati Devi, Habiba Gurjari, Indrakaur, Kushal Devi, Naamkaur, Raajkaur, Ranviri Valmiki, Seheja Valmiki and Shobha Devi attacked the British army and died while fighting.³⁴ Narratives on Avanti Bai claim to combine history and literature. She was the queen of Ramgarh, and belonged to the lodhi community of Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh. In 1857, she too faced the oppression of the British. She retaliated and fought fiercely. When she

was surrounded by British soldiers, she decided to kill herself rather than surrender to them. Her last death wish was that the British should leave the Indian soil and return to their country.³⁵ Mahabiri Devi belonged to the bhangi caste and lived in the village Mundbhar in the district of Muzaffarnagar. Though she was uneducated, she was very intelligent and opposed exploitation of any kind from an early age. She was born for the poor and fought for them. Slowly her fame spread. Mahabiri Devi made an organisation of women whose aim was to stop women and children from being involved in 'grihnit karya' (dirty work) and to live with dignity. In 1857, she made a group of 22 women and attacked the British. She fought bravely and killed many British. Finally she herself was killed by them and along with her 22 other unknown women died. She will always remain a source of inspiration.³⁶

Certain features stand out in these various narratives. Many of them claim to be centred around neglected dalit women warriors specifically, whose marginalisation cannot be tolerated by dalits any longer.³⁷ In all of them, these dalit women are depicted as brave from their very childhood, and the 1857 revolt becomes the turning point which sparks them to accomplish great deeds in the face of high odds. However, the voices of dalit viranganas themselves are usually faint discursive threads, as their stories of adventure and bravery are narrated through a variety of sources – oral, official accounts and dalit male authors. It is these authors who provide narrative coherence, filling in the gaps, and slipping into the present tense to add dramatic flourish and detail to the stories. The past and the present blur and mingle to provide a cohesive narrative of dalit oppression and the bravery of these women against all odds. Many of these dalit viranganas become the symbols of pride for one particular dalit caste. Thus Uda Devi is revered by the Pasis particularly, and has emerged as a symbol of Pasi honour, dignity, pride, mobilisation and rights.³⁸ On the other hand, Jhalkari Bai has been appropriated, eulogised and celebrated by all dalit groups, irrespective of divisions between them, and has become a symbol of unity of all dalits.

Most of these dalit viranganas have Devi or Bai suffixed to their names. They are also projected as highly moral, very "noble", super brave and super nationalist dalit women. They

are emblems of shakti. The written and visual images of these viranganas in the texts itself and on the cover of these pamphlets spectacularise them as usually clad in "masculine" attires, with their bodies all covered up. They are shown to be expert in horse-riding, swimming, bow-arrow and sword fighting.³⁹ Through such portrayals, dalits hope to garner greater respect, opportunity and dignity to these viranganas, and through them to all dalits. Simultaneously this feeds into conceptions of masculinity. It also covertly challenges notions of dalit female sexuality, and can be seen as a reaction to images of sexually immoral dalit women. By shunning outward expressions of sexuality, dalit women can also hope to build a space where they can wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture.

Poems and songs occupy a central place in these narratives, which eulogise the viranganas. It is interesting that many of these narrative poems ('khand kavyas') have cleverly appropriated the famous poem written by Subhadrakumari Chauhan on *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai*. Not only are the lines and the words given new meanings and completely reinterpreted, they are also easy to remember. Thus goes one on Jhalkari Bai:

khub lari jhalkari tu tau, teri ek jawani thi.
dur firangi ko karne mein, veeron mein mardani thi.
har bolon ke much se sun hum teri yeh kahani thi.
rani ki tu saathin banker, jhansi fatah karani thi....
datiya fatak raund firangi, agge barh jhalkari thi.
kali roop bhayankar garjan, mano karak damini thi.
kou firangi aankh uthain, dhar se shish uteri thi.
har bolon ke much se sun ham, roop chandika pani thi.
(Jhalkari you really fought, your youthfulness was unique.
You were a man among the brave in ousting the British.
We heard your story from the mouth of warriors.
You pledged for Jhansi to be victorious by being a friend of the queen.
Jhalkari, you rode from the Datiya gate, trampling the British.
You were like the Kali, and your strike was like lightning.
As soon as a British raised his head, you struck immediately.
We heard your deeds from the warriors, reciting tales of your bravery.)⁴⁰

These songs and poems are often recited in dalit melas and rallies, using dance and musical instruments. Plays too are enacted around them.

The main narrative plots have become more elaborate with time and many stories have been added on, connected to larger purposes of dalit identity. Thus in the Jhalkari Bai story, one episode repeatedly narrated is of Jhalkari being blamed for killing a cow, which had actually been hidden by a brahmin, but the truth is revealed.⁴¹ This story may be linked to challenging dominant colonial and Hindu narratives which have regarded dalits, along with Muslims, as killers of the "holy" cow. Another feature of these writings is that as they have grown, they have become more "sure" in their narrative. Thus for example, the earlier narratives on Jhalkari Bai claim her to be an accomplice of Lakshmibai, who took on her garb to save the rani's life. We can discern here a tentativeness or uncertainty regarding the role of Rani Lakshmibai in the revolt, where Jhalkari Bai is shown to be an accomplice or at most an equal of Lakshmibai.⁴² This has slowly given way to a more sure, authoritative and "mature" dalit history in which Lakshmibai, instead of a model nationalist ruler, appears as a weakling, as reluctant to fight the British,⁴³ and in fact, is shown as a British supporter and agent. It is stated that Jhalkari Bai was even worried that Lakshmibai might surrender herself to the British as she was very scared of war. Challenging myths and histories surrounding Lakshmibai, it is argued that in reality Lakshmibai not only managed to escape to the forests of Nepal with the help of the ruler of Pratapgarh, she died only in 1915 at the age of 80. It is Jhalkari Bai who is the real martyr and virangana. It is her name that ought to be written in golden letters. She was a dalit woman, with no kingdom, no palace, no expensive jewellery, and no silken clothes. She was neither a queen nor the daughter of a feudal lord, nor the wife of a 'jagirdar'. She fought selflessly, only for the love of her country, and thus her sacrifice far surpasses anyone else's.⁴⁴

As a historian, when I started working on these dalit viranganas of 1857, what concerned me was the absence of "hard core", "written" historical evidence on them in the archives. At one level, I am tempted to argue that anything that mesmerises one is worth cherishing and the magic is ruined by questioning its "authenticity". Carlo Ginzburg effectively shows how an early manifesto on history "from below" appeared in the form of an "imaginary biography", where the intention was to salvage

through a symbolic character, a multitude of lives crushed by poverty and oppression. The mixture of imaginary biography and historical documents makes it possible even for these dalit histories to leap at a single bound over a threefold obstacle: the lack of evidence, the lack of importance of the subject according to commonly accepted criteria and the absence of stylistic models. A multitude of lives that have been cancelled, destined to count for nothing, find their symbolic redemption in the depiction of immortal characters.⁴⁵ But this is not enough. Dalits themselves are keen to prove the historical credibility of their viranganas, and constantly site sources from literary accounts, British narratives, archaeology and oral histories. They claim their works to be "scientific", "truthful", "detailed". As says one:

aiithihasik sandarbhon bhitar, ankit sari hai ghatna.

nahn kalpana se kalpit hai – amar humari yeh rachna.

(The whole incident is noted inside historical sources. This immortal story of ours is not a figment of imagination.)⁴⁶

Scattered, often thin, evidence is sited and quoted by dalits repeatedly. Thus on Jhalkari Bai, a constantly quoted source is Vrindavan Lal Varma's *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai*. It was published in 1946 after intense personal research and historical reflection, and it mentioned the dusky-complexioned newly wed Jhalkari Dulaiya of the kori caste, who bore a striking resemblance to the Rani.⁴⁷ Vishnu Rao Godse, who is said to have been present in the fort when the Rani had fought against General Rose, too had made a reference to Jhalkari in his Marathi book *Majha Pravas* (My Travels). Similarly on Uda Devi, Amritlal Nagar's *Gadar ke Phool* and William Forbes-Mitchell's *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny* are often cited.⁴⁸

And today these stories stand as given, visible truths, with stamps issued in their name, many statues constructed, public rallies and meeting organised, celebrations and festivities conducted, and even colleges and medical institutions formed in their name. Thus, for example, a huge public rally and a mela is organised in Lucknow every year near the statue of Uda Devi at Sikandar Bagh on November 16, the stated day of her martyrdom.⁴⁹ With constant evocation, these names have become inscribed in popular dalit memories. Different political parties have repeatedly used these viranganas and made them an

integral part of their electoral campaigns and mobilisation strategies, the most successful being the Bahujan Samaj Party, who have used them to build the image of Mayawati particularly.⁵⁰

Are these representations of dalit viranganas historical fictions or fictive histories or something more? How real, exact and truthful in any case are “official”, canonised histories of 1857? Scholars have questioned the possibility of any one authentic history.⁵¹ Histories of dalit viranganas, who are simultaneously dalit and women, stand as persuasive accounts, as histories from below, reaching towards their own “reality”. They take recourse to recorded historical events and intermesh it with subaltern renderings of lost histories, deracinated by mainstream historiography. They are counter-histories of 1857.

READING DALIT HISTORIES OF VIRANGANAS

These popular histories of dalit viranganas are open to simultaneously persuasive, multiple and contradictory readings. There are, of course, limitations of this literature as a historical source. Their representation of dalit women too needs to be questioned. Very few dalit women themselves have penned these popular pamphlets. It is dalit men who are largely engaged in controlling the way images of dalit women are depicted.

While these dalit viranganas are portrayed as “superwomen”, full of bravery, and doing “impossible” acts, these glorifications and celebratory accounts do not extend to all dalit women in general. They offer a filtered vision, viewed through the eyes of the creators of these images. Victimhood is replaced by a new archetype of heroism. Jhalkari Bai is shown as even killing a tiger single-handedly.⁵² Although empowering, these images are not necessarily more representative of dalit women. Further, many of these viranganas are physically attractive in their appearance, “classic” beauties, falling into the stereotype of female beauty.⁵³ Simultaneously, there is an assertion of a super moral dalit female subject perhaps also allowing dalit men to police the behaviour of dalit women in general. Some of these tracts appear didactic in their endorsement of certain patriarchal values. They are often replete with images of the loyal wife and an ideal mother.

It may thus be argued from a dalit feminist perspective that the emergence of popular dalit male literature has not altered

much the images of dalit women. Though vastly different in their scope, area and portrayals, these presentations codify dalit women in certain ways, and fail to offer a more meaningful portrayal of them. The representations often remain simplistic, rarely revealing the complexity, and dimensionality that make up dalit women's life. They offer incomplete projections to which not many dalit women can fully relate to. Save for who controls the representations, has anything much changed for the dalit woman? As has been contended by Bell Hooks, this may apply a mere transference, without radical transformation.⁵⁴ A true liberatory potential may only be realised when dalit women themselves can create and represent their own histories and images through a collage of identities and sing their own songs.

To stop here however would be offering only one side of the picture. These women figures can also provide counter-hegemonic and oppositional perspectives about dalit women and about the 1857 revolt. The representation of dalit viranganas on a high moral and heroic ground can also be seen as an appropriation of respectability and "credibility", imparting dalit participation in past histories new meanings. These dalit viranganas represent dalits in the service of freedom and Indian nationalism. Here the subalterns are very much speaking, to inverse Spivak's proposition,⁵⁵ and they are speaking through these dalit women viranganas. They are representing their own voices. As has been pointed out, "While Spivak is excellent on the 'itinerary of silencing' endured by the subaltern, particularly historically, there is little attention to the process by which the subaltern's 'coming to voice' might be achieved."⁵⁶ At places the achievements of these dalit viranganas are juxtaposed to the pathetic conditions of dalit women in general, blaming society at large and men as well, stating that in spite of having a brave past and being protectors of dalit dignity, dalit women have been denied education, have been made slaves, have been oppressed by men.⁵⁷

Dalit women too are now trying to use these images in multiple ways to their maximum advantage. Besides ways in which these symbols have helped build up Mayawati, many have used these figures to question representations of dalit women in general, as well as their oppression and exploitation in real life. Thus Meena Pasi stated, "Uda Devi and Jhalkari Bai

have shown to me that I too can resist all kinds of injustices. I do not have to take things lying down. These figures inspire me to question why I am getting less wages from the landlord, why I am beaten up by my husband when I do equal, if not more, work. I can look up to Uda Devi and say that nothing is impossible if one has the will to resist and fight".⁵⁸ These representations of dalit women viranganas may thus also be seen as "positive engendering".⁵⁹ They question and disrupt usual dominant stereotypes of dalit women, either negatively as 'kutnis' (evil) and vamps, or as passive victims, powerless and subordinated. The centrality of the dalit viranganas in the 1857 revolt in popular dalit literature provokes reflection on the enabling potential for women's real lives of ubiquitous icons of dalit feminine power.⁶⁰ These images also form a part of feminist studies, as instead of focusing on just dalit women's "victimisation", they point to their power and strategies of resistance, even though penned largely by men.⁶¹ Here dalit women are actors and agents in their own right. They are transformed from victims into victors within the context of a narrative. Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Mahabiri Devi, and along with them many other dalit women, emerge as physically commanding and armed, infused with power, strength, bravery, activism and sacrifice, locked in violent conflict with the British.

It may also be argued that what we are dealing with here is no ordinary, academic history. While creating a history of pride, through these celebratory accounts dalit writers are accruing for themselves a psychic space and harnessing the resources needed to hold their own. It is also a history that wishes to, in its own limited way, challenge and subvert conventional modes of thinking, both about 1857 and about dalit women. While it may not be inherently radical or transformative, it provides progressive and different readings. Dalit women here are signifiers of 1857 and through that of dalit identity. These are not just stories of brave dalit women but of all dalits, of their legacy, of their bravery, of their pride, of their sacrifice in service of the nation.

NOTES

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Sudha Pai, Mukul Sharma, Rajni Tilak and Ashok Bharti for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.]

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- 2 See for example, D C Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram mein Achchuton ka Yogdan*, Triveni Press, Lucknow, 1990, 2nd edition; Mohandas Naimisharay, *Swatantrata Sangram ke Dalit Krantikari*, Nilkanth Prakashan, New Delhi, 1999.
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- 9 Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: Indian Revolt of 1857*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, pp 50-51.
- 10 Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, pp ix-x.
- 11 Gautam Bhadra, 'Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven' in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985, pp 229-75.
- 12 Bhadra, 'Four Rebels', p 230.
- 13 Badri Narayan, 'Inventing Caste History: Dalit Mobilisation and Nationalist Past', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 38, Nos 1 and 2, 2004, p 199.
- 14 Quoted in Rajni Disodiya, 'Virangana Jhansi ki Jhalkaribai', *Apeksha*, Year 3, No 9, October-December 2004 (Special issue on Bihari Lal Harit), p 89.
- 15 Ram Dayal Verma, *Virangana Uda Devi*, Mahendra Printing Press, Hardoi, 1996; idem, *San 1857 ki Amar Shaheed Virangana Uda Devi (Khand Kavya)*, Manoj Printers, Hardoi, 2nd edition, 2004, p 15. Henceforth, I will be using this second edition. The writer is a Pasi.
- 16 Badrinarayan, 'Inventing Caste History', p 201.
- 17 Verma, *San 1857*, p 13.
- 18 Mohandas Naimisharay, *Virangana Jhalkari Bai*, Radhakrishna, Delhi, 2003, p 5; Thamman Singh 'Saras', *Avantibai Lodhi: 1857 ki Amar Balidani*, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1995, p 8.

- 19 Scholar Badri Narayan in his recent book *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, Sage, Delhi, 2006 has provided a comprehensive analysis on this subject from a contemporary angle. However, his emphasis is more on how these dalit women heroes are being used by the Bahujan Samaj Party to build the image of its leader, Mayawati. I am on the other hand interested in how we view History from a dalit feminist perspective and in that how we analyse the role of these dalit viranganas.
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- 25 To name a few, Naimisharay, *Virangana Jhalkari Bai*; Ansuya 'Anu', *JhalkariBai*, Publications Division, Indian Government, Delhi, 1993; Mata Prasad Sagar, *Achhut Virangana*, Cultural Publishers, Lucknow, 1987; Jagannath Prasad Shakya, *Jhansi ki Sherni: Virangana Jhalkari Bai ka Jeevan Charitra*, Mukesh Printers, Gwalior, 1999; Bhavani Shankar Visharad, *Virangana Jhalkari Bai*, Anand Sahitya Sadan, Aligarh, 1988. *Jhalkari Sandesh* (magazine), Agra.
- 26 For example, Sheelbodh, 'Jhalkaribai: Ek Aithasik Karvat', *Apeksha*, Year 3, No 11, April-June 2005, pp 85-89.
- 27 See for example, Verma, *San 1857*, p 15.
- 28 Naimisharay, *Swatantrata Sangram*, pp 133-37; Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram*, pp 21-25.
- 29 Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram*, p 25.
- 30 Shakya, *Jhansi ki Sherni*, pp 51-54.
- 31 Verma, *San 1857*, p 36.
- 32 W Gordon-Alexander, *Recollections of a Highland Subaltern: During the Campaigns of the 93rd Highlanders in India, under Colin Campbell, Lord Clyde in 1857, 1858 and 1859*, Edward Arnold, London, 1898, p 104.
- 33 Raj Kumar Pasi, *Pasi Samaj ka Swatantrata Sangram Mein Yogdan*, Pasi Shodh Evam Sanskritik Sansthan, Lucknow, 1998, pp 7-20; Verma, *San 1857*, p 20.
- 34 P S Verma (ed), *Dalit (Swatantrata) Pira*, Vimukt Jati Trading Private Ltd, New Delhi, 1992, p 18.

- 35 'Saras', *Avantibai Lodhi; Naimisharay, Swatantrata Sangram*, p 142.
- 36 Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram*, p 26.
- 37 Verma, *San 1857*, pp 5, 17.
- 38 Narayan, 'Inventing Caste History', pp 193-220.
- 39 Verma, *San 1857*, p 23.
- 40 Shakya, *Jhansi ki Sherni*, pp 1, 44.
- 41 Naimisharay, *Virangana Jhalkari Bai; Shakya, Jhansi ki Sherni*, pp 16-27.
- 42 Shakya, *Jhansi ki Sherni*.
- 43 Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram*, p 21. Dinkar quotes S N Sen, *1857*, pp 267-96, to prove the point about 1857 revolt beginning against Lakshmibai's wishes.
- 44 Naimisharay, *Viranganan Jhalkari Bai*, p 5; Dinkar, *Swatantrata Sangram*, pp 21-25; Naimisharay, *Swatantrata Sangram*, p 136.
- 45 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late Twentieth Century Miscarriage of Justice*, trans Antony Shugaar, Verso, London and New York, 1999, pp 111-14.
- 46 Verma, *San 1857*, p 16.
- 47 Vrindavan Lal Varma, *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai*, Mayur Prakashan, Jhansi, 1987 (1946), pp 92-95, 324. For an analysis of this work see Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, pp 215-24.
- 48 William Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny*, Macmillan, London, 1893, pp 57-58. Quoted in for example, Pasi, *Pasi Samaj*, pp 8-11; Verma, *San 1857*, p 8.
- 49 I was present in the mela held in 2005. It is organised by an organisation called 'Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Sansthan'. Every year they take out a 'Smarika' on the occasion. See *Smarika: Virangana Uda Devi Pasi Shaheed Diwas*, Lucknow, Virangana Uda Devi, Smarak Sansthan, Lucknow, November 16, 2005.
- 50 Badrinarayan, *Documenting Dissent*, pp 138-54; Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes*.
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- 52 Naimisharay, *Virangana Jhalkari Bai*.
- 53 Shakya, *Jhansi ki Sherni*, p 2; Verma, *San 1857*, p 23.
- 54 Bell Hooks Resources, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston, 1992, p 126.
- 55 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1988, pp 287-308.
- 56 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory/Contexts, Practices, Politics*, Verso, London, 1998, p 108.
- 57 Verma, *San 1857*, p 21.
- 58 Personal interview with Meena Pasi on November 16, 2005 at Lucknow. She, along with many other women, was a participant in the celebration of 'Uda Devi Shaheed Diwas' on that day.

- 59 For elaboration, see Vidya Daheja, 'Issues of Spectatorship and Representation' in Vidya Daheja (ed), *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1997, pp 1-21.
- 60 This reminds us of ways in which images of female goddesses too have been seen as having an enabling potential sometimes, or even to go the other way. See for example, Nilima Chitgopekar (ed), *Invoking Goddesses: Gender Politics in Indian Religion*, Shakti Books, New Delhi, 2002; Arjun Appadurai, Frank J Korom and Margaret A Mills (eds), *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Motilal Banarsi Dass, Delhi, 1991.
- 61 Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, Chapter 9; Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'Introduction: Feminism and the Politics of Resistance', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 7, No 2, 2000, pp 153-65.

In Search of Alternative Histories of 1857: Witch-hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chhotanagpur

Shashank Sinha

AS an event which shook the foundations of British rule in most parts of north India, necessitated large-scale administrative and policy changes, and fired the nationalist imagination, 1857 still continues to be a relatively under-researched terrain. The initial obsession with simplistic epithets like “sepoy mutiny”, “war of independence”, “nationalist uprising” and “Muslim conspiracy” did subsequently pave way for a exploration of civil, popular and organisational aspects [Majumdar 1957; Chaudhuri 1957; Sen 1957] as India celebrated 100 years of the “Great Uprising”. Published the same year, *1857: A Symposium* [Joshi 1957] opened up tremendous possibilities be examining issues such as the background of the rebellion, role of religion and the Wahabais, popular culture, social composition and leadership patterns, feudal rivalries, and internal contradictions. The enthusiasm generated by this centenary volume was soon lost in the absence of systematic follow-up writings. The publication of Eric Stokes’ *Peasant and the Raj* (1978) and *The Peasant Armed* (1986); Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983); and Gautam Bhadra’s ‘Four Rebels of Eighteen Fifty Seven’ (1985) in the late 1970s and 1980s marked a significant advance in mainstream writing with the inclusion of peasants and subaltern issues against the backdrop of factors like mobilisation methods, caste, demography, and ecology. These were complemented by two intensive regional studies on the popular dynamics of the revolt in Awadh [Mukherjee 1984] and Bundelkhand [Roy 1994]. Within the larger framework of documenting “rebels’ histories”, the late 1990s saw an initiative from the

Aligarh Historians Group (a special issue of *Social Scientist*, Vol 26, Nos 1-4, January-April, 1998) to integrate areas like popular culture, tribals, literature, alternative sources, and sepoy contingents in the 1857 repertoire. In the opening years of 21st century, Rajat Kanta Ray (2003) added another interesting dimension to the historiography by an investigation of the mentalities of the rebels.

When one looks at the last 150 years, writings on 1857 have been characterised by some conspicuous gaps and omissions – in terms of the absence of a sustained and systematic research as also the social and geographical space traversed. The historiography of 1857 has largely been dominated by commemorative volumes on general aspects of the rebellion. Areas and characters outside the Indo-Gangetic plain still continue to be marginalised in the various historical accounts so do adivasis, peasants, dalits, and women. With the exception of Awadh and Bundelkhand, and to a lesser extent east Punjab, there is a glaring absence of full-length regional studies. The reopening of the debate, in the wake of 150 years of the revolt, does indeed offer some alternative possibilities in relation to the use of source material, historical approaches, and revisiting received wisdom. The recent writings do raise questions of popular and contemporary interest but old concerns and characters largely predominate – Bahadur Shah Zafar, Delhi, Indo-Islamic culture, role of Wahabis [as it does with Dalrymple 2006]; sepoy mutinies and Mangal Pandey [see Mukherjee 2006]. As we celebrate the 150th anniversary there is an even greater need to recover some lost ground and expand the social and geographical horizons of the debate.

Based on a fragmentary source base, this article attempts to open up a small frontier in a “little known province of the Empire” – the Chhotanagpur: an area where women were involved in the uprising more as victims than as active participants. Briefly outlining the 1857 experience in the region,¹ this introductory piece investigates the occasioning of perhaps the first mass witch-hunts among tribal communities of Singhbhum and Santhal Paraganas. Within the broader framework of social history, it tries to argue that these witch-hunts formed a conscious contour of resistance combining both (the obvious) gender but also anti-colonial tensions.

CIVIL REBELLIONS

Chhotanagpur offers a brilliant example of the multiple contours an event (1857) can take in a region. While sepoy mutinies provided the underlying current, there were both inter and intra-district variations in the civilian movements. Both the sepoy mutinies and the civilian outbreaks had some clear interconnections and some linkage or the other with the "mainstream" mutiny. Together they posed a serious challenge to colonial rule in the region. Given the geography of the region,² for a short period as the mainstream revolt raged (July-October 1857), with the involvement of relatively unorganised battalions, and the directorial efforts made by the rebel sepoys, the sepoy mutinies, for their part, in Chhotanagpur were more than just "spontaneous". There was a pattern in the mutinies – with sepoy units from Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Purulia (Manbhumi), and Singhbhum marching towards the local power centre. The modus operandi was also similar: looting the treasury, attacking official bungalows and buildings, destroying government records, breaking the jails and releasing the prisoners and marching to Ranchi.³ Once in Ranchi, the sepoys did make serious efforts to enlarge their social base by not only mobilising influential local zamindars but also sending emissaries to other districts. On August 4, the proclamation of the establishment of 'Padshahi Raj' was circulated throughout the district. Towards end-August, the rebel administration also called a political conference to resolve potential issues and to deliberate on the future course of action [Kumar 1991].⁴

1857 also triggered off a series of civil rebellions by giving vent to many existing tensions and contradictions some of which were not predominantly anti-British at the outset. What is interesting to note is how they intersected with regional complexities and changing socio-political configurations to acquire an anti-colonial context. Herein lay the strength of the "spirit of 1857". It opened up the unresolved Santhal question in Hazaribagh and Manbhumi. The Santhal 'Hul' was an extended movement in which the Santhals of Hazaribagh and Dhanbad also participated. While the Santhals of Santhal Parganas region had been pacified by the creation of a new district and administrative arrangements⁵ nothing was done to address the

grievances of their brethren elsewhere. The Santhals of Hazaribagh did naturally become excited by the weakening of authority and started squaring accounts with oppressive money-lenders and other perceived oppressors [Roy Choudhury 1959: 67]. They also attempted to cut off communication between Hazaribagh and Ranchi. The Santhals of the Manbhumi were similarly restive when the sepoys of the Ramgarh Regiment met them at Purulia on August 5. They rebelled and attacked the zamindar of Jaipur where they looted and murdered many (*Hazaribagh Old Records*, p 97). The Santhal zone of depredation had in fact become the “most disturbed part of Chhotanagpur”.

Known as the “best-known episode of tribal outbreak in 1857” [Singh 1998: 77], the Chero-Bogta (tribal) uprising in Palamau caused a quite a bit of concern for the colonial administration. By end November the “whole country appeared to be in arms, and Lieutenant Graham with his small party, was shut up and besieged in the house of Raghubar Dayal (one of the local feudal lords) whilst the rebels were plundering in all directions” [Roy Choudhury 1959: 97]. Later in 1858 they were joined by sepoy mutineers from Ranchi and Hazaribagh (after the defeat at the battle of Chatra) and later by Shahabad rebels from the Kunwar Singh and Amar Singh camp.

In Singhbhum, there are two distinct phases. The first phase (from July-August to November-December 1857) was marked by the resurfacing of the traditional rivalry between the Porahat and Saraikela families “transmitted from father to son for several generations” [Roy Choudhury 1959: 78-79]. The latter phase (beginning with the attack on Porahat, November 1857 upto 1861) was characterised by confrontations between the British (supported by the ‘raja’ of Saraikela and Kharaswan) on the one hand and Arjun Singh’s supporters and large sections of Kols on the other. There was a definite discontent among the tribes of the region – the system of written oaths, annual visits by the commissioner, insistence on regular payment of tax, attempts to increase the rate of assessment and to change the mode of assessment had led to the creation of a new situation in Kol heartland. But whether this discontent did transform into a project of direct political opposition or a “rebellion of the Kols” involving the “entire community”, as Gautam Bhadra would

have us believe, is something which needs to be examined (1985: 259). Bhadra overlooks the methods adopted by Gonoo (a tribal leader and a principal adherent of Arjun Singh) and the threat of collective violence used by his followers to enforce cooperation from vacillating elements within the community. He also underplays the fact that half of the ‘mundas’ and ‘mankees’ (traditional village heads) who had earlier been incorporated in the colonial administrative setup (by giving them revenue and police powers) remained loyal to their colonial masters [ibid: 258].

There were surely other methods of extra-political resistance through which the Kols counteracted colonial intrusion. Bhadra does acknowledge elsewhere that “all administrative regulations like the ban on witch-hunts were systematically violated” during the upsurge [Taylor 1996: 84]. He however fails to see this as a conscious contour of resistance. Resistance to colonial rule among marginal societies was not always very “direct” and “visible” therefore what is required is a shift in focus from “extraordinary moments of collective protest” to “variety of non-confrontational resistances and contestatory behaviour” [Haynes and Prakash 1991: 1-2]. Such actions, if one were to borrow James Scott’s expression, avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority but are not devoid of consciousness. The symbols, the norms, the ideological forms they create constitute the indispensable background to their behaviour however imperfect or “partial their understanding of the situation might be” [Scott 1985: 38]. The world of witches, spirits and ‘ojhas’ (witch doctors and medicine men) was a very vibrant and reflective one; it resonated with, yet contested the impact of colonial rule in myriad ways.* In the context of the significance and the fear in which witches and ojhas (also known as ‘mati’, ‘sokha’, ‘jan guru’) were held in the adivasi world, administrative regulations and a systematic tirade against witch-hunts and ojhaism in the years preceding 1857 were challenged and defied. Witch-hunts therefore represented a mode of resistance, which was apparently less direct, seemingly less confrontationist, and one with a greater community sanction. We shall further investigate this argument in the last section but a small discussion on adivasi constructions of witches here would help us comprehend things better.

‘WITCH-HUNTING’

Belief in ‘dains’/‘dans’/‘churails’ (witches) or ‘bongas’ (spirits) occupied a central place in adivasi cosmology and moral economy. “There is no genuine Santal”, wrote Bodding, “who does not believe in witches” (1986: 38). *Reak Katha* records: “Witchcraft is the great trouble with us Santals. Because of witchcraft, people in the village become enemies, doors of relatives is shut, father and sons quarrel, brothers are separated, husband and wife are divorced and in the country people kill each other” [in Bodding 1994: 160].⁷ While accepting that the practice was common to many countries, Valentine Ball noted that conditions in the tribal heartland were particularly unique: “It is a peculiarity here that the belief (of witchcraft) was so thorough that even those who are accused of being witches or sorcerers do not deny the impeachment but accept the position readily with all its pains and penalties” [Ball 1985: 115]. Considered a general social threat, such a belief was deeply soaked in tradition and ingrained in folklore. According to an old Oraon saying the world is as full of disembodied spirits “as a tree is full of leaves” [Roy 1984: 91]. The central idea behind the adivasi religious system therefore was to seek an alliance with the highest and the most “helpful” spiritual entities and through them control the “harmful” ones [ibid: 93]. The evil powers had to be scared through exorcism or magic [Troisi 1979: 204]. The adivasis made a distinction between white magic (socially and psychologically beneficent) and black magic (maleficent or evil): The minister of white magic was known as ojha or diviner and medicine-man, while that of black magic, dan, witch or sorcerer (ibid). The ojha sought to expose and counteract the anti-social activities of witches and the evil influence of the impersonal spirits.

The witches were feared as mysterious creatures imbued with phenomenal powers: “[they] are supposed to have intercourse with the *bongas*, which gives them the power of killing people by eating their entrails and also of causing fevers, murrain in cattle and other kinds of evil” [Man 1983: 152]. They can therefore kill either directly or by “setting (up) the bongas”. The bongas in turn may bring destruction and death either by themselves or through agents [Raut 1979: 402]. The witches, adivasis held, not only “ate” persons and induced illness such as cholera, small-pox, etc, but were also responsible for destroying crops, killing

cattle and the like. The dains were, in fact, human embodiments of the “evil-eye” or “evil-mouth” [Roy 1985: 257] and could cause harm accordingly: if they cast “evil-eyes” on a person the victim suffered stomach complaints, headaches, fever, etc; if they uttered “harmful” lines by looking at somebody, the person was sure to suffer a fatal disease [Raut, ibid: 401-03].

Of particular interest here is the adivasi construction of disease and sickness and how they related to the urgent need for physical elimination of the witches. Wilkinson noted that the Kols believed in three causes that led to sickness – witchcraft, angry bongas or the spirit of someone who had died. While there was remedy for angry bongas and ancestor spirits who could be appeased by sacrifices – first of fowls, then goats, and if these two did not work then bullocks and buffaloes were offered – there was none for the witches who had to be removed (*Singhbhum Old Records*, p 271). Dalton extends the argument to include animals as well: “all diseases in men or animals (are) attributed to one of two causes, the wrath of some evil spirit who has to be appeased, or to the spell of some witch or sorcerer who should be destroyed or driven out of (the) land” [Dalton 1960: 208]. While these observations are largely true, these should not let us to believe that adivasis did not have any medicinal system. Boddings (1986), on the contrary writes about a fairly elaborate system of root medicines and herbs. However their world of “medicine” was a fairly extended one including sacrifices, mantras (incantations), divinations, and amulets. The traditional roots and herbs were mostly supplemented or substituted by prescriptions from the ojhas particularly in cases where the disease was uncommon, serious, or did not heal in a short time. Boddings says: “...it is not strange that a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when people fall ill and do not recover” [Boddings 1986: 38]. Man writes, “no reasoning with them, nor ridicule can dissuade them of their belief in witches, and of the necessity of their being at once murdered” [Man 1983: 29-30].

Elsewhere I have argued that witch-hunts were multiple reflections of social and gender tensions and how they intersected with strains generated by the colonial rule to give new dimensions to “ritualised violence” [Sinha 2006]. The article however overlooks the fact that witchcraft also represented an arena for different, at times conflicting, notions of health and

medicinal systems: a conflict reaching a showdown in the years preceding the 1857.

UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENA

The preceding discussion provokes a lot of questions. What is so unusual about the witch-hunts around the mid-19th century or for that matter in 1857? Are there any comparable examples from adivasi world elsewhere in India? Why would these hunts be also labelled as having an anti-colonial element? How and why they should be seen as acts of resistance? After all the region had a long history of witch-hunts. In 1792, John Shore had talked about the Santhal ways of “trying witches” [Archer 1979: 482]. Forbes in his *Oriental Memoirs* (1813) referred to some established witch-trials [Crooke 1969: 272]. According to the *Campbell Notes*, Buchanan learnt that 25 children died annually through the “malevolence of witches” at Bhagalpur [Crooke 1969: 284]. Wilkinson observed “murders related to witchcraft were a part of traditional practice in Singhbhum [and they] were not confined to the person supposed to be the witch but all near relations of the supposed witch killed so that none may remain to retaliate on parties who committed the murders” [Roy Choudhury 1958: 88]. Dalton, the commissioner of Chhotanagpur during the revolt, mentions that accusations of witchcraft were made in many districts and persons who were thus denounced were subjected to much “ill-use” if they could escape with their lives [Dalton 1872: 208].

The new entrants to the scene were a series of regulations by the colonial administration banning witch-hunts and ojhaism. Hardiman says that after their conquest of India, the British sought to outlaw persecution of witches; a practice seen by them as barbaric. Around the middle of 19th century (1840s-1850s), the ban on witch-hunts was enforced in Gujarat and Rajasthan [Hardiman 2006: 217-18; Skaria 1997: 135]. Wilkinson, the political agent of the Chhotanagpur agency in the 1830s, banned the practice of witchcraft and ‘sokhaism’ [Roy Choudhury 1958]. His famous directive (1837) necessitating comprehensive administrative interventions included specific instructions against murders related to witchcraft. Wilkinson wrote, “I found a hope of destroying their belief in witchcraft by establishing a hospital, more particularly if the medical gentlemen who may have to attend

the sick will take an interest in the human undertaking." He stated: The conviction in the minds of the aborigines that some persons have in their possession witchcraft causing illness, or epidemic had to be liquidated. There should be an encouragement to bring the diseased to the hospitals and the doctors for a proper cure. The medical officer should be liberally encouraged to explain that medicine only can cure the disease and if this message of cure through proper medicine be spread, belief in witchcraft will decrease (*Singhbhum Old Records*, p 271).⁸

Bhadra says that by entrusting the 'mankis' with police powers, the colonial state gave them the task of punishing such new "crimes" as witch-hunting [Bhadra 1985: 258-59]. Later, Dalton took firm measures to put down the practice of 'soka'. He declared it a crime for any person to practise a soka or any person to employ a soka. Cases of murder, which originated in witchcraft and in the power to be possessed by a soka, were to be treated as crime (*Singhbhum Old Records*, p 279).⁹

Skaria points out that most adivasis responded to the ban with hostility and resistance (p 138). In his study on the Bhils of western India, Hardiman asserts that colonial administrators failed to acknowledge the degree to which the notion of witchcraft was socially embedded and universally believed in as a matter of common sense [Hardiman 2006: 219]. Roy Choudhury argues that the zeal with which the early British administrators in Singhbhum threw themselves into reforming the "jungleerry" into a civilised tract was also partially responsible for the havoc that followed. He writes, "It was mostly a case of mistaken wisdom and a result of not getting into the genius of the people and their mental framework before the policy was made...To them (policymakers) the very ideas that went to make up the mental framework of the Hos were an anathema" [Roy Choudhury 1959: 88]. The administrator mostly recruited from the military was in a state of perplexity. He cites a letter (No 57 dated October 21) where the administrator was instructed that "it was not expedient to treat the enticing way of a married adult woman as a criminal offence while on the other hand was given repeated instructions to fight the deep belief in witchcraft and 'Sokhaism'" (*ibid*). While the administrators were confused the adivasis were agitated.

The witches eat us and when we catch them and worry them just a little, the magistrates again turn the matter round and resort to imprisonment; we

feel great distress; what can we possibly do, so that it might go well with us; we are utterly bewildered. Also when we explain it to magistrates they do not believe it; they say: Well then let her eat my finger, then only shall I believe she is a witch and then they jail you. The witches do not eat using a vessel and a knife, quite so; by sorcery they send people off to the other world straightaway (from the *Reak Katha*, p 160).

The belief that witches were flourishing under the *benevolent power* of the British was increasingly gaining ground.

Formerly the village headmen and his deputy were subduing them, and if they would not be peaceful, they would together with the village people, drive them away from the village after having disgraced them; but nowadays the magistrates have made them utterly audacious so that we men have become absolutely disheartened (*ibid*).

The adivasis of the Dangs would say “that since the Dakuns had received our [British] sympathy, they had become quite outrageous.” Others felt that dakans had increased since the British had established their rule [Skaria 1997: 139]. So intense and widespread was the belief in witchcraft that a fracture had already occurred in the colonial regulatory mechanism in the years preceding 1857. Ricketts in his report on the district of Singhbhum (1854) noted that the Mankis and the Mundas were reluctant to report cases related to witch-hunting because to the community it was no crime [Bhadra 1985: 259]. To use Hardiman’s words, “the practice was driven underground rather than suppressed ...local holders of power took action against witches because they were convinced that they had a duty to preserve their society from malign supernatural forces” [Hardiman 2006: 220]. Skaria points out that the general sympathy for witch-killers led to attempts by ordinary Bhils, their chiefs, and even the local Rajput power-holders, to conceal killings from the British [Skaria 1997: 138].

The climax came during the political disturbances surrounding 1856-57 when the hold of the British administration was temporarily loosened. In his account of the hul (the Santhal rebellion) Chotrae Deshmanjhi describes how a number of girls accused of witchcraft were shown “the pod and pea” and slain [Archer 1984: 482-83; Archer 1979: 4]. Ball similarly points out, “during the disturbed times of the mutiny in 1857-58, when law was suspended in these regions, the Kols of Singhbhum and other parts of the province availed themselves of their freedom

to make a clean sweep of the witches and sorcerers who had accumulated in their midst, under the benign influence of British authority" [Ball 1985: 116]. Though most killings went unreported one could even see the turnaround in the cases registered with the police.

Under the first class of offence against the person there is a remarkable increase in the number of murders. The average of the previous five years was seven cases in which eighteen persons were implicated. The returns of 1859 exhibit fifty-nine cases of murder, in which 218 persons were implicated. It appears, however that 50 of these cases occurred during the disturbances of 1857 and 1858, the people availing themselves of the temporary withdrawal of our authority to indulge in their superstitious desire of exterminating witchcraft. Further, the terrible destruction of human life, as Lieutenant Birch remarks, which was caused by this superstition is difficult to contemplate (*Singhbhum Old Records*, p 134).¹⁰

Effectively combining both gender and anti-colonial tensions, witch-hunts were systematically incorporated into the mobilisation strategies of the anti-colonial adivasi movements in Chhotanagpur. In the 'Ulgulan' (the famous Birsa Munda Uprising of 1899-1903), to secure recognition of the clan brotherhood's right to the forest they had settled in, women were denounced as witches and killed. K Suresh Singh refers to an *Ulgulan* song in which the principal enemies of the tribes – witches, Europeans, and other castes (dikus) – are placed in the same category.

Oh kill the witch, such the poison,
O kill, kill
O Father, kill the Europeans, the other castes
O kill, kill [Singh 2002:101].

NOTES

1 I have enormously benefited from rich collection of primary documents in three sourcebooks compiled by P C Roy Choudhury – *Hazaribagh Old Records* (1761-1878), (1957); *Singhbhum Old Records* (1958); and *1857 in Bihar (Chhotanagpur and Santhal Parganas)* (1959) all published by Gazetteer's Revision Section, Revenue Department, Patna.

2 Chhotanagpur had very irregular topography with forests and plateaus; therefore movements were very difficult.

3 In the case of Santhal Parganas, there were three phases of sepoy action between June and October 1857. The sepoy units marched

- to their respective headquarters at Rohini or Bausi.
- 4 For a detailed discussion on the military government in Ranchi, see Kumar 1991.
- 5 There were no civil rebellions in the Santhal Parganas during 1857.
- 6 For a detailed discussion see Sinha 2006.
- 7 The first version of this Santal text was published in 1887 by L O Skrefsrud, was translated with notes and additions by P O Bodding in 1942.
- 8 *Witchcraft Leads to Murder*, Notes from the Singhbhum Old Correspondence in Commissioner's Record Room, *Singhbhum Old Records*, Ranchi. Wilkinson's tenure also marked the direct administration of Singhbhum by the British.
- 9 *Notes on 'Soka' or Witch Finder* (1860), Digest of some letters in Commissioner's Record Room, *Singhbhum Old Records*, Ranchi.
- 10 Letter from Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Chhotanagpur, Vol No VII - Old Correspondence, Singhbhum, 1860, No 4455 in *Singhbhum Old Records*.

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FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS

The Mutiny Novel

Creating the Domestic Body of the Empire

Aishwarya Lakshmi

IN 1897, when *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* observed, “Of all the great events of this century as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination” [Anon: 218], it was empire as a domestic space that was being consumed. This paper argues that though the adventure novel has come to stand metonymically for the “novel of the empire”, from mid-century onwards, Victorians increasingly imagined India as a domestic space standing in a contrastive yet politically and morally necessary relation to the metropolitan nation. This figuration ultimately created the moral economy of colonialism, and continued to undergird even early 20th century adventure novels like *Kim*. The key incident in this shift was the Mutiny of 1857, which marked a shift in governance from the rule of the Mughal emperor, with East India Company as protectors, to the Crown. Mutiny novels code this shift as a movement away from India as a space of adventure and begin to create the empire as a domestic space. By an examination of two Mutiny novels, Meadows Taylor’s *Seeta* (1872) and Flora A Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), I show that this domestic body of the empire was gendered and deterministic. I argue that this figuration reified the early 19th century depictions of India as a “feminine land”, and brought it in a morally necessary and subservient relation to Britain by yoking the previous masculine west and feminine east division within the confines of an unequal marriage.

Literary critics, in discussing the Mutiny novel, have focused on its “gothic” aspect: the fascination with rape and horror, the blatant racism, and the figuration of the English and Indian

women within it as symbols of chastity and licentiousness respectively, both in need of rescue.¹ When the gendered and domestic body of the post-1858 space has been discussed, it has been in terms of the figure of the Indian woman in these novels who metonymically stands for "India" in need of moral and civilisational rescue (the converse is the figure of the English woman who stands in for the empire in need of the organisation of military chivalry) and in terms of the "separation of spheres" of the racial divide within this body. I show that it is the figuration of the land that ultimately creates the gendered, deterministic body of the empire, with India as the passive feminine and the British as the active masculine partner, and that it is this intimate and "necessary" relation that undergirds the separation of spheres policy practised in colonial relations with India post-1858.

This paper revises Antoinette Burton's claim arising from her work on British feminists in England that mid-century onwards, Victorians were increasingly imagining England and India "concentrically" rather than contrastively [Burton 1994: 35]. Burton shows that British feminists by making the "uplift" of Indian women their special province, a task necessary for the moral good of the empire, re-imagined the national public space as a national-imperial one. This allowed them to argue for an extension of this space to include women in an enhanced public (yet still within the traditional female) role. Thus Burton argues, Victorians widened the circumference of the national space and drew India within it. While I agree with Burton that India was being imagined as an extension of the national space, reconceived as a national-imperial one, I show that this space was not a uniform space circumscribed from a fixed centre (metropole), as Burton's geometric analogy suggests. Instead, this space was differentiated, comprising of an active, masculine metropolitan and a passive, feminine, colonial space, a difference that created a "centre" and lent dynamism to it.

Thus, just as the passive figure of the Indian woman lent a dynamism to the feminist discourse, the figuration of the feminised Indian land 1860 onwards lent mobility to the colonial discourse. This feminised land, however, marks a shift from the late 18th and early 19th centuries picturesque and romantic figurations of it, where the "feminine east", stood in varying

degrees of opposition to the masculine west and stalled or questioned its expansive thrust. The picturesque in the late 18th and early 19th centuries painted a feminised, unthreatening, nostalgic landscape. Images of fading, classical grandeur sublimated by temporalising present confrontations but worked as an oppositional "Other" to a dynamic, expanding Britain, albeit in limited ways. In romantic figuration, best expressed in Lady Morgan's 1811 novel, *The Missionary*, the feminine east, both in the Indian priestess, Luxima, and the exotic locale of Kashmir, serves as a counterpoint (even if a deceptive one) to the masculine west (here the Portuguese missionary, Hilarion) with the power to subvert it by seduction.² The Mutiny novel, by yoking this opposition (romantic of masculine Britain to feminised India) and quasi-opposition (between the picturesque fading grandeur and vigour of British expansion) into a domestic framework, not only bound east to west in an ideologically necessary relation but also made one party subservient and passive. Furthermore, any subversive potential of this feminised land was erased by depicting its picturesque and exotic beauty not as a property of the land but of the British eye. The feminised post-Mutiny India, unlike the earlier romantic or picturesque feminine, is closed in on itself and inert.

This feminised, domestic land undergirds later adventure novels set in India. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, India was recuperated as a space of adventure in fiction: in novels like *Kim*, and in popular juvenile fiction like that of G A Henty (Boyd 2000: 66-68). Literary history has tended to see the adventuring space of India sketched in these novels as continuous with the late 18th and early 19th centuries adventure narratives of merchants and mercenary soldiers. I show that the two spaces are in fact radically different. The adventuring space traversed by boy-heroes bears little resemblance to the foreign terrain which the early 19th century adventurer-heroes like Henry Lawrence, James Skinner, and to some extent, even Meadows Taylor negotiated. Instead, these adventures take place in a bound, surveilled domestic space of India, a creation of the Mutiny novel. This paper therefore revises literary history, which by ignoring the Mutiny novel and Anglo-Indian fiction from the second-half of the 19th century, has continued to plot the empire as a space of adventure; from the late 18th to

the early 20th century. It calls for a re-alignment and re-reading of the late 19th century adventure novel within the post-Mutiny domestic ideology and figuration of the empire.

CREATING GENDERED AND DOMESTICATED SPACE

On May 10, 1857, soldiers of the Bengal Army in Mirath, India, revolted and killed their British commanding officers. The soldiers then marched to Delhi and entreated the by now titular Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, to head the revolt against the British. This appeal was followed by revolts by several other native regiments in north India, who congregated in Delhi and in other Indian courts, like that of the court of the (recently deposed) Nawab of Awadh in Lucknow. The British, who had been completely taken by surprise, recuperated quickly, and by late September 1857, the city of Delhi was retaken after a prolonged siege. The fall of Delhi was a decisive blow to the mutineers but fighting continued well into 1859 as the struggle was continued by peasants under local landlords and rebel leaders.

In March 1858, the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was put on trial, found guilty of “treasonable design of overthrowing and destroying the British government in India”, and exiled to Burma (Noorani: 19). In November 1858, Queen Victoria’s proclamation enacted the transfer of power from the Mughal emperor (with the East India Company as protectors) to the Crown and granted pardon to all those who surrendered who were not guilty of murdering an Englishman or woman. The document used the language of benevolent maternalism with Victoria as a sort of mother figure, willing to grant “mercy” and “take back” her subject-sons.³ Begum Hazrat Mahal (the queen who kept up resistance to the British in Lucknow) rebutted the proclamation and rejected the offer of surrender, pointing out that this “maternalism” was misleading at best and disingenuous at worst. Not only was there no possibility of fair trial (or any trial at all, in many cases) for those who surrendered but the offer dispossessed all those who rebelled. Moreover, entrance into the domestic body of the British empire was founded on the punishment of “a whole army and people”⁴ for a rebellion against a government that did not exist prior to it.

Acting on both the past and present, the proclamation and trial heralded the domestic body of the empire. The “our government” of the trial and proclamation appeared to pre-rather than post-date the Mutiny, retroactively creating the “legal conditions” for the king to be put on trial for “treason.” Furthermore, by not simply dispossessing the Mughal ruler but making him appear in court on charges of sedition, the very symbols of the past were put on trial to legitimate the present and change the shift of ruling powers: from an act of usurpation to a lawful procedure. Thus, while British counter-insurgency operations in which rebels were blown from guns and hung on trees, while villagers were burnt followed the classic Foucauldian paradigm of leaving traces of its brutality in “spectacles” to make British power visible, in discourses of the law, politics, and fiction another kind of memory formation was enacted: to erase the traces of violence and create the past as illegitimate. Since the violence of the “counter-insurgency” operations was directed against the sovereign body of the Mughal ruler, it could not function as the legitimate in discourse, unless the old law was itself put on trial and discredited.⁵ The purpose of discourse, thus, was to convert violence into the form of the Law that could perform important retroactive ideological work on the past and the immediate present. Ultimately, what this discourse stands testimony to, therefore, is a usurpation and “appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it”.⁶

This paper focuses on one element of that discourse, Mutiny fiction, and examines two Mutiny novels, *Seeta* and *On the Face of the Waters*, to outline the ideological work these novels did for the empire. I show that the novels created a gendered, domestic space of India that in a move similar to the proclamation, erased the revolutionary potential of the Mutiny and created the empire’s normativity. This was achieved in two ways: by structuring the novels as a movement from adventurous, disordered space to a domestic ordered one, and using the Mutiny to make the historical law (the historical need of the Indians for the British) visible. The latter is achieved by racialising aesthetics and the land, such that both become evidentiary and reveal this law. Like the proclamation, therefore, the novels transform the Mutiny, from a contested time-space to a transparent event that reveals India’s “need” for Britain.

SEETA (1872)

Philip Meadows Taylor (1808-1876) was born in Liverpool, and set out for India in 1824 at the age of 15. He worked for the Nizam of Hyderabad and served him in several capacities: as interpreter on courts martial, assistant police superintendent, in the army, as magistrate and collector in his territories [Taylor 1986]. Taylor was one of the old school men like Skinner and Lawrence, who unlike the "competition wallah" and the Indian Civil Service (ICS) men, mixed with Indians and adopted some modes of their life. Ideologically as well, he was closer to the utilitarian reforming zeal of the 1830s. *Seeta* forms the third part of a trilogy, comprised also of *Tara* and *Ralph Darnell*, the former being set in 1657 and depicting the rise of the Marathas (which in part led to the weakening of the Mughals in the 17th century), and the latter in 1757, the year of the battle of Plassey. *Seeta*, set in 1857, and recounting a tale of the Mutiny, completes and "fulfil" the story of British ascendancy in India.

Seeta, first published in 1872, though a post-Mutiny novel is written from a perspective that was largely unfamiliar to, even condemned in the post-Mutiny era. Most markedly, the novel depicts an inter-racial marriage, something that though accepted in the early 19th century was virtually anathema post-Mutiny.⁷ The marriage is central to the plot, which is as follows: Cyril Brandon, the young magistrate of Norpoor, falls in love with Seeta when she appears in court to identify the assailant, Azrael Pande, her husband's murderer. Defying convention, Cyril and Seeta get married. Soon after marriage, Cyril realises that though their marriage is happy and Seeta an accomplished woman (in Sanskrit scriptures), she will never be the kind of companion that an Englishwoman could be. He finds himself attracted to Grace Mostyn, his friend's sister-in-law. Seeta also faces trouble in the form of caste excommunication, exclusion from Cyril's English life and friends, the pressure to become Christian, and finally the realisation that her marriage will not be recognised as legitimate under English law. Any children born of the union will be debarred from the right of inheritance (on Cyril's side). The domestic troubles coincide with the coming of the Mutiny, and one day when the rebels, led by Azrael Pande, attack the house, Seeta is shot trying to save Cyril.

She dies, Cyril and Grace return to England, where they get married and eventually inherit Cyril's ancestral property.

The novel uses the picturesque to create India as a domestic space and mark the difference between British and Indians, in order to delegitimise the latter's claim to the land. The picturesque is pitted against the Indian's "sacred" consumption and activation of the land. The picturesque and the sacred landscape aesthetics were in fact dominant modes of depicting the land by the British and Indians respectively in the early 19th century. The picturesque, where one viewed the land "as in a picture", derived pleasure from this act, and recorded the view in journals or sketches, was a prominent mode of consuming India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by the British. The sacred landscape aesthetic, practised by Indians in the same period, is a more inclusive term, comprising of several landscape styles (such as the Mughal, the courtly) but all were characterised by non-realistic and hieratic depictions of the land. In the novel, the picturesque retains some of its specificity as a landscape aesthetic but the sacred landscape aesthetic transforms into the general term "sacred" denoting various kinds of engagement with and on behalf of the land – from religious worship to rebellion (guided by religious motivation). The novel, however, historicises and racialises both aesthetics. Thus instead of being modes of imaging, negotiating, and mapping oneself on to the land, they become markers of "states of civilisation": the picturesque of the modern and civil and the sacred of the static and non-modern. The final reification takes place towards the end of the novel in a "trial scene", where the picturesque and sacred are pitted against each other and the sacred loses. Like the trial of the emperor, however, this is also a staged event in which one party has lost even before entering the court.

The very opening paragraphs of the novel set up the opposition between the picturesque and the sacred. The novel begins with a picturesque description that moves into a description of how the land is the repository of layers of civilisation and ancient memory:

It was nearly midnight. A slight passing shower had just fallen, and the moon, nearly at its full, shone out with brilliant luster over a scene at once strikingly beautiful and impressive. At the head of one of the long ravines which descend westwards from the plateau of central India,

was a deep, lonely glen, the upper end of which was closed by one of those abrupt precipices of basalt, which everywhere a small stream, swelled somewhat beyond its wont by showers of the rainy season, now poured a considerable body of water with a dull continuous roar...At the foot of the fall, and bordering part of the pool, was however an open space, now covered with soft green sward, the only level spot in the glen for some miles of its course, where, on one occasion in each year, the people of the country round held a kind of fair, bathed in the waters of the pool, and worshipped the local deities to whom it was held sacred. At other times, indeed, the place had an evil reputation, and was carefully avoided.

At the back of this level spot, grew a vast peepul tree of enormous size and remarkably picturesque though peculiar character. (1-2)

The above leads into a description of a banyan tree, the site of Hindu worship, and the sacred character of the tree reached far beyond that, to a period when it was probably adored, together with the image of the rudely carved twisted snakes which lay at its foot, by the ancient tree and snake worshipping tribes of the country. By the side of the snake-image, too, rested a pile of stones, smeared with vermillion and lampblack. This had existed from rude times, even beyond those of the snake-worshippers...

Nor was the spot destitute of other ancient religious associations. Two thousand years ago, perhaps, a Boodhist fraternity of monks or devotees had selected this spot, as they did hundreds of others, for its wild beauty and absolute seclusion, and with infinite pains and labour had excavated from the trap-rock a small Vihara or monastery ...It consisted of a square hall, at the end of which, in an apse or recess, was a large statue of Boodh in a sitting posture,...and it seemed as if the mild, placid features ever looked out benignly into the beautiful glen, and over the sparkling waters of the stream. (2)

The second passage works with a different perspective from the first, as it descends from a place of transcendent viewing to give a scene on and from the ground. It marks the narrator's interest in domestic spaces (what lies at the "foot of" and "the back of") and the division between the narrator's and Indians' consumption of the land. The first passage gives a beautiful view of the land, and the second a sense of how the land is activated by lived religious practices that call on different times and civilisations (tribal, Hindu, Buddhist). This land seems to have depth to it, but space as the villager's activation of it by worship is ultimately inert, a fact that the figure of the Buddha begins to mark. Of all the deities, the banyan tree, the snakes, the

'Vihara', that form part of the scene of the glen, it is only the figure of Buddha who is given a "gaze": Buddha presides over this scene and looks out benignly into the glen and waterfall, and sanctions the picturesque scene of the fall ("as if the mild, placid features ever looked out benignly into the beautiful glen, and over the sparkling waters of the stream"). The figure of Buddha gazes in the same manner as the narrator in the opening paragraph, and this alignment gives internal sanction to the narrator's own gaze. Buddha, here, works as W J T Mitchell's "threshold" figure, who "sits in" for the narrator (artist), and allows us entry into the native space. As Mitchell has argued, the particular task of the threshold figure is to sanction the gaze of the narrator (artist), by revealing that the native deity (figure) "sees" in the same manner as the narrator (artist).⁸

Buddha sanctions the gaze of the narrator, which emerges as the ideal and politically right consumption of the land. Only viewing in the manner of the narrator (and the proxy figure of the Buddha) gives access to wholly unproblematic, "neutral," beautiful scenes. Apart from the "view" of the waterfall (by Buddha) and of the ravine (by the narrator), all other spaces and objects are double-edged: the banyan tree throws shadows "in weird, ghastly forms", the stones, if neglected, can cause "sore penalties of sickness", and the glen itself transforms into an "evil space" at times. The other consumption of the land, that the villagers engage in with the local deities, leads to a double-edged activation of the land.

Yet another activation by the rebels is also suspect, and is given in our first introduction to them: about 20 men "whose savage appearance betokened a hard, lawless life" are congregated around a fire in the cave, "and as the flames leaped high, occasionally almost to the roof, they lighted up the fierce faces around, and the great image behind with it its soft, placid features, in strange contrast with each other". (3) Just as the figure of Buddha sanctioned the narrator's gaze previously, now the figure condemns these men. The men are bandits (who will eventually become rebels), and their image, which is at odds with the calm one of Buddha, makes them internally dissonant with the landscape. The bandit rebels are the reverse of the threshold figure. Not only do they not gaze like the narrator but they are at odds with and their presence unsanctioned by the

very "landscape" (on behalf of which they will later fight). Their entrance into the social body – the village of Shah Gunje, in which the novel is set – is also conceived as an infection and a threat, which is neutralised only in their deaths at the hands of Cyril and Mostyn. The community is now "rehabilitated" and is like a fair.

Next morning the town was like a fair. The people from villages around brought garlands of flowers, and laid them at Br Brandon and Temple's feet. The dancing girls of Shah Gunje dressed themselves in their gayest apparel, and spreading carpets in the chowke [square], danced and sang ballads in Cyril's praise... Then as the old English flag was once more hoisted amidst the shouts of the people, and garlands were hung on the staff, and cast at its foot, all felt that the English were in authority once more, and there would be peace (pp 397-98).

There were no such scenes of rejoicing in the years of 1857-58; in fact, when the British did re-establish authority, it was often at great cost to the native populations of the individual cities and villages, and their return was accompanied by fear. Here, of course, entire Shah Gunje, rather than the mere market, is a "fair", and there is rejoicing "as had never been remembered before" (Seeta: p 398). This "restitution" of the communal space does to memory what the counter-insurgency operations did to the land, which is to wipe out the "clinging to the memories of old rulers and old systems of government" (Seeta: p 425). The novel obfuscates memory by showing the rebellion to be not part of the communal body at all. The rebels are an infection, and the rebellion the "evil year" that had to run its course, rather than a year of possibility to which were tied the hopes and aspirations of many people. What was remarkable about the Mutiny was precisely its communal nature: how, despite lacking a common cause and unitary organisation, it was taken up by diverse groups of people and its hopes adopted by even the spectators. As Kant points out in his discussion of the French Revolution, the historical potential of a revolutionary event lies not with the actors but with the spectators' reaction to the event.⁹ Taylor, in denying that the Mutiny had a social spectatorial aspect – that it was even tied to the social in any significant way – by making it merely an act of personal, misguided vengeance, cuts away at the historical potential of the event for Indians.

Not only is the event of the Mutiny denied a spectatorial aspect but the Indians themselves emerge as incapable of spectation. We saw this in the opening scene, where only the narrator and the proxy figure of the Buddha were capable of gazing. The rebels lacked a gaze even of a disturbing animalistic kind (as we find for instance in Conrad). It is not only the undesirable but also the “good” subjects who are unable to spectate: Seeta, the exemplary subject, accomplished and civilised in her own right, is unable to spectate as well, and finally marks the “fact” that it is not the Indians but the British who have a claim over the land. The connection between visual purchase of and actual proprietary claim over the land is made in an incident that takes place in a “trial scene” towards the end of the novel: Seeta, Cyril, and Grace all find themselves in a temple on a hill, on the side of which a river runs. Seeta is engaged in an act of worship, and Cyril and Grace admire the prospect by picturesque gazing and sketching. It is only the latter two who are able to “properly appreciate” the land: Seeta, herself, is engaged in quite another act, and when she does cease worshipping, she becomes the subject of Grace’s sketch that Cyril completes.¹⁰

The scene dimly echoes one in *Northanger Abbey*, where Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland are on Beechen Cliff overlooking the city of Bath, and Henry gives Catherine a lecture on picturesque viewing [Austen 1948: 86-88]. Though Austen is partly satirising the picturesque craze in the above, the scene also establishes the kind of companionship their marriage will be: one between not quite intellectual equals, but where one – only too willing and able to learn – can be “tutored” into the proper companion. In the scene on the hill in *Seeta*, the picturesque also marks the legitimate pair and the nature of heterosexual companionship. It “unites” Cyril and Grace, as they share in the pleasure of spectation, and marks that they are the legitimate pair. It shuts Seeta out by pointing out that she is not capable of being tutored into picturesque gazing (the entire novel chronicles the attempts and failure of Cyril to make her into a Victorian wife). It is not simply the possibility of conjugal happiness and “equality” of relation that the picturesque marks but also the kind of citizenships all three are capable of. Cyril and Grace because they can engage in picturesque gazing, have

a greater purchase on the land than Seeta. She is not a "spectator" herself, and according to Taylor's logic, lacks the adequate modern understanding equated here with visual consumption of the land that is the pre-requisite of being a citizen. In a re-adjustment of the alignment of the actual ownership of property and proprietary viewing of the landscape in England in the early 19th century that Helsingher has pointed out [Helsingher 1994: 103-25], here, although Seeta is the heir to a substantial amount of property, her lack of proprietary viewing (that the idea of landscape encourages) signals an inability to participate in the kind of citizenry of the empire open to the English pair. Her own worship and person can be the subject of the picturesque gaze and sketch but like the idols in the opening paragraph, is meant to merely inhabit not possess and own the landscape.

Taylor uses the picturesque to create the desirable object of the land, to prove the undesirability or inertness of the Indians' consumption and activation of it, and thus genderises as well seals the social body from within, with respect to its capacity for mobility on its own. It is finally in the scene on the hill, where the picturesque and sacred are put on "trial" – a staged event as well as a moment of a differend – that sacred and picturesque aesthetics are reified into stages in history, and the fate of the social body limited to the sacred is sealed. By equating the picturesque with modern sensibility and the right to citizenship, Taylor calls on the liberal-reformist thought of J S Mill, which rests political morality on the institutions of modernity and makes full citizenship contingent on the possession of a modern sensibility, but renders static the pedagogic dynamism of this ideology (where at the end of the road, India would be tutored into civility and modernity) by making the inability to spectate an intrinsic attribute of Indians.

In the next novel, the picturesque is used sparingly and is coded differently from *Seeta*. Instead of allowing for the attachment of affect to land created as desirable object, the picturesque appears (when applied to Indian land and buildings) as the sign of the immoral and the intellectually deficient. Steel works with a Ruskinian religious-moral understanding of aesthetics, where art and architecture speak not only to the states of civility but of moral and intellectual capabilities. This

allows her to read Indian objects and land as revelatory of racial characteristics, a reading that allows her to conclude that India requires an autocratic colonial master. The liberal-reformist trajectory of *Seeta* (albeit a stalled one), therefore, transforms into a despotic, static colonial system in *On the Face of the Waters*.

ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS (1896)

On the Face of the Waters, first published in 1896, was written by Flora Anna Steel (1847-1929). Steel, like Taylor, spent a great part of her life (22 years) in India, and felt a strong connection with the country. Steel was a Scot by birth and came to India in 1867, as the wife of a British officer, Henry Steel, in the ICS, and remained there till 1887. She came back in 1894 to conduct the research for the novel, when she went through government archives, and like her heroine, Kate Erlton, lived on the roof of a house, to get a feel of what it was like [Steel 1930: 15]. Like Taylor, Steel was also a firm imperialist, and indeed, evinces a racism that is absent in Taylor. Steel wrote several novels and short stories set in India, and also published collections of Indian folk-tales.¹¹ She is best known, however, for her Mutiny novel, and for a handbook for Anglo-Indian housewives *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888), that became the “Bible of young memsahibs” in India in the 19th and early 20th century [Sen: 33].

On the Face of the Waters received critical acclaim on its first publication in the heyday of British imperialism in India: it was very popular and ran into several editions. Some likened Steel to Kipling, and welcomed the novel as the first serious novel on the Mutiny [Patwardhan: 41]. The novel revolves around the story of Kate Erlton, caught in an unhappy marriage with Major Erlton, who is having an affair with a Mrs Alice Gissing. The hero, Jim Douglas (alias James Greyman) enters Kate's life when she wishes to bribe him into smoothing over an indiscretion of her husband. Their lives become intertwined when the Mutiny occurs, and Kate finds herself fleeing with Douglas. They travel in disguise for a while, live concealed in Delhi, and finally are saved when the British conquer the city in late September 1857. The novel also attempts to give the Indian

side of the story, in the sub-plot of the platonic love affair between the widowed princess Farkhoonda Zamani, living in a street, Mufti's alley, in Delhi, and Prince Abool-Bukr, the king's (Bahadur Shah Zafar's) eldest son. The two stories briefly intersect when Kate is given shelter by Farkhoonda but end very differently. Kate and Jim are united at the end of the novel (Major Erlton having died in battle), whereas Abool-Bukr, on surrender, is treacherously killed by Major Hodson (the last two characters are historically real and so is the incident), and Farkhoonda continues in Delhi in relative poverty, subsisting on the income she derives from teaching at a girl's school. We are also given a sketch of the life at the palace of Bahadur Shah and his wife, Zeenat Mahal (again, both real historical characters), which was the seat of rebellion till the city fell, and the king and his wives (the princes were massacred) were exiled to Burma.

Steel uses the picturesque sparingly to describe the Mughal palaces and buildings in Delhi but codes this beauty in a Ruskinian manner, indicating that it displays the pleasure of refinement for its own sake, divorced from nature, "and thus speak[ing] to the destruction both of intellectual power and moral principle" in its Indian creators [Ruskin: 10]. The Ruskinian formulation of artistic Indian objects is complemented by the understanding of everyday Indian landscape and created objects. Here the Ruskinian tension between form that is interpretive and imitative (enamoured of its own perfection and hence uses its own form as model) is transformed into one between form and matter, terms that fall on the moral/immoral divide. Steel depicts quotidian Indian spaces as oppressive and not pleasing to the western eye, an oppressiveness that derives from a sense of twin lacks in it: of morality and of form. Both ultimately allow Steel to argue for the necessity of the British as the "form bringer" and moral agent. These twin lacks best emerge in the following description of a village:

The winter rains had come and gone, leaving a legacy of gold behind them. Promise of future gold in the emerald sea of young wheat, guerdon of present gold in the mustard blossom curving on the green, like the crests of waves curve upon a wind-swept northern sea. Far and near, wide as the eye could reach, there was nothing to be seen save this – a waving sea of green wheat crested by yellow mustard. But in the centre, whence the eye looked, stood a human ant-hill; for the congeries of mud alleys, mud walls,

mud roofs, forming the village, looked from a little distance nothing else. Viewed broadly, too, it was simply earth made plastic by the Form-bringer, water, hardened again by Sun-fire; the triple elements combined into a shell for labouring life.

... It is a scene which to most civilised eyes is oppressive in its self-centred isolation, its air of remoteness. The isolation of a community self-supporting, self-sufficing, the remoteness of a place which cares not if, indeed, there be a world beyond its boundaries (pp 118-19).

The “form-bringer” in this scene is not the human beings but water: it is what renders this scene dynamic and creates shapes. It is no wonder that this scene is “oppressive” to the western eye, for apart from the natural element of water, there seems no higher human activating principle that is capable of giving form and dynamism to this inert matter of the land. Indeed, the Indians, when they do give “form” and create, manage to create nothing better than an “ant-hill”, and their agency here is purely of the natural labouring kind, a fourth element in the quartet of earth, water, and sun. The post-script , which seems to offer a kind of counter-assertion to the “civilised eye”, in fact ends up reinforcing this eye and its gaze, for it points out that the “counter-gaze” to the civilised eye is not a gaze at all but a lack of one: the villagers do not care to and do not look out to the world.

The *Mutiny* renders dynamic this still, oppressive picture, and works as a potential “form-bringer”. When Douglas hears the report of a spy that Moulvie, a rebel, is wanted for he is to give the “word” that is to start the rebellion,

Jim Douglas felt an odd thrill. He had never thought of that before. Some one, of course, must always give the word, the speech which brought more than speech. What would it be? Something soul-stirring, no doubt; for Humanity had a theory that an angel must trouble the waters and so give it a righteous cause for stepping in to heal the evil (p 162).

The rebellion, pictured here not simply as an act of blind or bestial vengeance but aligned with the “word”, points to not only a rational organisation behind the event but to an active human agency guided by a divinity or prophecy that could render the social body and history dynamic. The latter emerges in the passage’s biblical allusions: to *Genesis*, where the word and “Spirit of God mov[ing] upon the face of the waters” (*Gen* 1.2) creates form out of the void earth, and to kings, where the

prophet Elisha smites the water and casts salt in it to heal it, so that there will be “no more death and barren land” (2 Kings 2.21). Historically as well, the Mutiny was understood prophetically: as a fulfilment of the centenary prophecy that British rule would end a hundred years from the Battle of Plassey, 1757 [Kaye and Malleson 1891: 356-57]. Moulvie’s giving of the “word”, therefore, could follow the above formulations, as a human act that is ultimately guided by a divine power. It could also work within a secular framework, where the “word” has the possibility of “making history” in the western historiographic sense, of a willed act that sets a certain trajectory in motion. The “word” would then open up history and reality by working as the “latent, unuttered future word”, as a signal, pointing to a yet unimagined future, as set forth in the following formulation by Dostoevsky: “reality in its entirety is not to be exhausted by what is immediately at hand, for an overwhelming part of this reality is contained in the form of a still latent, unuttered future Word” [Morris 1994: 100].

The rebel’s word, however, is none of these. It is not the Indian spy but Jim who recognises the place of the word in making history and feels the “thrill” at this understanding. The Indian use of the word is purely instrumental and not a little base: to use “soul-stirring” rhetoric to arouse immediate passion for the cause. While the rebels might well work within and be guided by a prophetic framework, the letter of the prophecy is false and their use of it base. Finally, they are unable to take a spectatorial stance towards the prophecy that would allow them, like Jim, to understand its place in making history. Though the rebel’s word precipitates the rebellion, the action merely follows the letter of the word; hence is an act of repetition rather than an act that opens up the present and future. Instead, it is the ripple caused by the gain-bringing angel, recalled from kings that works as the true “word” in the passage. The movement of the ripple sets a certain historical action in motion (the rebellion), necessitating the intervention of the British, as agents of god and healers. This “word,” however, though it seems to be opening up present reality, actually “exhausts” it, for it is able to predict and mark the course of the future. The openness of the present, therefore, that is real in Dostoevsky, both in the actual *socius* and in the novel that portrays the

“reality” of the *socius*, becomes part of a causal sequence in *On the Face of the Waters*. The passage does, however, mimic the dynamism of the “latent Word”, creating an internal, mystical dynamism of colonialism.

Instead of opening up the oppressive scene of the ant-hill, the Mutiny reinforces its inertness by showing that the “word” of the Indian cannot be aligned with the spirit that activates history. His/her action is incapable of working as the “form-bringer”. If the mutiny is aligned with the “spirit”, it is that of the angel, of Steel’s recalled *Kings* or the God of Genesis who temporarily causes a disturbance on the waters so it can purify it and rid the land of “barrenness”. The Mutiny does, however, split the oppressiveness in another direction: the land is no longer intractable to the western eye but signals its need for that eye to confer form to it. The first major act of the rebellion, the ousting of the British from Delhi and the control of the city by the rebels under the kingship of Bahadur Shah, makes this clear:

And the birds, startled from their roosting-places by the stumbling, falling figure (of a drunk sepoy), waited, fluttering over the topmost branches for it to pass, or paused among them to fill up the time with a last twittering song of good-night to the day; for the sun still lingered in the heat-haze on the horizon as if loath to take its glow from that corona of red dust above the northern wall of Delhi; mute sign of the only protest made, as yet, by the Master against the mutiny.

And now He had left the city to its own devices. The rebels were free to do as they liked (p 235).

The land finally meets the desire and narcissism of the civilised eye and works as a sign signalling its own need of this eye. The very sun is unwilling to take its glow from the red dust created by the hoofs of the rebel horses in Delhi, in protest of the British “master’s” departure from the city. The birds, the sun, all go about their tasks unwillingly and wait the return of “the master’s” steps, and when the British re-conquer it, the city is described as “once more echoing to the master’s steps, and the city-folk, as they looked eagerly from the walls, had the first notice of defeat in the smoke and flames of the sepoy lines” (280-81). There were, of course, no eager spectators when the British entered the city; they had to, in fact, win the city street by street, as the rebels and citizens kept up the fight in small alleys, like the Mufti alley, which proved strategic for them. Like

Taylor, therefore, Steel too shuts out the disturbing spectatorial aspect the Mutiny had for Indians. Taylor's notion that Indians welcomed the re-instantiation of British rule finds a new formulation here, for the Indians are shown as welcoming not only a benevolent but a tyrannical paternalism.

The elision and strategic re-insertion of the gaze of the land and Indians finally creates a master/slave dialectic between British and Indians.¹² This relationship works with a body metaphor, with the British as "spirit" and Indians as the "body", and not only makes the relation between the two a spiritually necessary one but also converts what is a despotic relation depending on stasis for its continuation, into a mystical and dynamic relation. It also makes Indians emerge as non-spectators at a higher (or lower) level than in *Seeta*: Indians are intrinsically unable to be activating agents of history – their agency is only of the natural, labouring kind (and never goes beyond this even in the rebellion), and will never be able to take the spectatorial stance that the "spirit" can towards history, which is the prerequisite for "making history" in this schema.

CHANGING FIGURATIONS OF INDIA

Both novels create a gendered domestic body of the empire. It is the elision of the "gaze" of the land, however, (apart from a narcissistic one) that marks a major shift from early 19th century romantic and picturesque figurations of India and creates land as not only feminised, as in the past but determined and bound to its master. This imagination of the empire was popular, as the sheer number of Mutiny novels (around 40) published in the latter half of the 19th century indicates, and heralded the major Anglo-Indian novel form, the "station romance", that came into its own and dominated the second half of the 19th century. It was also, however, a fantasy – of obliteration of the revolutionary historical potential of the Mutiny, and of a "new" post-1858 space in which no traces of the past would linger. In this it parallels other colonial discourse from the times, which also set out, ambitiously and fantastically, to create a blank slate of India.

A brief example will suffice. In June 1858, Lord Canning, the last governor-general of the East India Company and the first

viceroy of the crown, issued a proclamation to confiscate all proprietary rights in the land of Awadh, so that that once the land had been cleared of all previous titles, it could more easily be awarded to the new proprietors as a “free and incontestable grant from the paramount power” [Metcalf 1964: 147]. In reality, Canning’s fantasy of obliterating past titles could not be acted out. James Outram, commissioner of Awadh, was aware that such a move would prolong the rebellion and realising that the country could not be restored to peace without the help of the old taluqdars (landlords), sent out the proclamation with a cover letter granting a one-on-one settlement of lands with the landlords, thus limiting the force of Canning’s proclamation. Ultimately Canning himself came around and was instrumental in creating a powerful body of taluqdars, with increased rights in the land in Awadh, serving as a bulwark for the empire against the unrestful agrarian, peasant population [Metcalf 1964: 150-56].

Memory transformation and even erasure did take place but not in the initial ‘tabula rasa’ fantasy of Canning or of the Mutiny novel, which effectively creates a blank slate of Indian memory. The reinstatement of the taluqdars took place by disregarding all customary rights of the peasants in the land, which had hitherto given them negotiating power with the landlords. The taluqdars, therefore, continued, not as mere revenue collectors of the Mughal emperor or the Awadh nobility but as magistrate and landlord all rolled into one [Metcalf 1964: 150-54]. What appeared to continue from the past, therefore, the taluqdari system, only resembled it in name, and in fact concealed massive ground-level changes. What was lost and erased did not manage to make its way into narrative and legal discourse, except for occasional concerns expressed by British and Indian champions of peasant rights. British policy, post-1858, generally followed the trend of Canning’s revised decision and was consistently characterised by “non-interference” and a preservation of “tradition.” This “tradition,” however, was a creation of colonialism. Its “preservation” only led to a hardening of previously fluid institutions.

Similarly, the Mutiny novel obscured memory of the picturesque and sacred aesthetics by a continued usage but in changed and historicised forms. The historicised picturesque and sacred aesthetics not only pre- rather than post-date the

Mutiny in the novel, and hence like the taluqdari system appear to emerge from the “past”, obscuring their early 19th century usages but also become “evidentiary”: of the historical necessity and inevitability of British victory and Indian defeat during the Mutiny. Historicism’s marking of these aesthetics as historical winners and losers gained ground in the latter part of the 19th century and continues to inform post-colonial India. In the 1880s, when proto-national figurations of India begin to emerge, it is the picturesque which is used to create a mythological, sacral landscape of India. In post-colonial India, in re-tellings of the Mutiny, the sacred is depicted as the sign of a limited imagination, incapable of taking a spectatorial, “progressive” stance towards history, and the picturesque, yet again, helps organise nationalist sentiment. Thus, though the novel did not, like Canning’s proclamation, manage to erase the revolutionary potential of the Mutiny or the past for Indians, historicism transformed the very medium of expression of the resistance when it came.

NOTES

1 On the Mutiny gothic see, Robert Druce, “And to Think that Henrietta Guise was in the hands of such human demons!”: ‘Ideologies of the Anglo-Indian Novel from 1859 to 1957’, *Shades of Empire*, C C Barfoot, Theo D’haen (eds), Amsterdam-Atlanta, G A Rodopi, 1993, pp 17-34; Patrick Brantlinger. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY, 1988.

For an excellent discussion of the Mutiny novel see Gautam Chakravarty’s *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*. This paper extends the recent work of Chakravarty, which marks a shift in work on the Mutiny novel, by arguing that the novel is not the originator of but continuous with early 19th century representations of India. The paper shows that this continuity was maintained by appropriating and transforming earlier representations.

2 This novel was, incidentally, re-published in 1857 with slight revisions under the title of *Luxima, The Prophetess: A Tale of India*, to cash in on the renewed interest in India, as well as to offer an interpretation of the “religion” of Indians (Islam and Hinduism are conflated here) that played an important part in the Mutiny.

3 I quote a brief extract: “We deeply lament the evils and misery which have been brought upon India by the acts of ambitious men who have deceived their countrymen by false reports, and led them into open rebellion. Our power having been shown by the suppression of that rebellion in the field, we desire to show our mercy by pardoning the offences of those who have been thus misled, but who desire to return to the path of duty.”

Already in one province, with a view to stop the further effusion of blood and to hasten the pacification of our Indian dominions, our viceroy and governor-general has held our the expectation of pardon, on certain terms, to the great majority of those who in late unhappy disturbances have been guilty of offences against our government and has declared the punishment which will be inflicted on those whose crimes place them beyond the reach of forgiveness". 'Proclamation by the Queen (of England) in Council, To the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India', November 1858, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh (FSUP)*, Vol 2, Rizvi, Bhargava (eds), pp 526-27.

- 4 This is taken from Hazrat Mahal's proclamation. The sentence, of which this quote forms a part, reads as: "If the Queen has assumed the government, why does Her Majesty not restore our country to us when our people wish it? It is well known that no king or queen ever punished a whole army and people for rebellion; all were forgiven; and the wise cannot approve of punishing the whole army and people of Hindustan" 'Rejoinder to Queen Victoria, Proclamation by the Begum of Oude (Awadh)', December 1858, *FSUP* (ed) Rizvi, p 530.
- 5 What is important about Foucault's discussion of public execution is that it is crucially tied to the law. It is this that makes it a political ritual. As he elaborates: "We must regard the public execution, as it was still ritualised in the 18th century, as a political operation. It was logically inscribed in a system of punishment, in which the sovereign, directly or indirectly, demanded, decided and carried out punishments, in so far as it was he who, through the law, had been injured by the crime. In every offence there was a 'crimen majestatis' and in the least criminal a potential régicide." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, pp 53-54.
- 6 The entire quote, which bears on the nature of the event of the Mutiny is also worth quoting: "An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked "other" Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F Bouhard, Sherry Simon, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1977, p 154.
- 7 Thus a reviewer of *Seeta* in the *Calcutta Review* (1873) regards such marriages as "doubtful and dangerous", and another in 1879, comments thus on his characters: "Taras and Seetas, it need scarcely be mentioned, are absolutely never to be met with in Anglo-Indian drawing rooms or boudoirs, and if dear interesting Aunt Ella herself, with her weary beads, short petticoat, and long staff, were to apply for an ayah's place in one of the nurseries of Chowringhee, her merits would have small chance of being recognised". As quoted in Bhupal Singh, *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction*, Oxford University Press, London, 1934, p 50.
- 8 I borrow the term and understanding of the "threshold figure" from W J T Mitchell's discussion of such (Maori) figures in John Alexander Gilfillan's painting, *Native Council of War* (1855), W J T Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, p 23.

- 9 Kant is interested in reading the French Revolution as a "sign" (of progress) in history, a sign that reveals something (the fact of progress) in the past, the present and the future. A sign, by definition, for Kant, has to read on all three dimensions, Kant. *Kant: Political Writings*, pp 177-90. The nationalist reading of the mutiny, will read the event like Kant's "sign", where it reveals the "desire for the nation" in the past, present (the historical moment of the nationalist present), and the future.
- 10 Immediately following this scene, Seeta and Grace each throw a garland into the river, which according to local custom, will sink or swim deciding the fulfilment or denial of a person's wishes. Grace's garland, predictably swims and Seeta's sinks, reinforcing the fact that it is the land that ultimately and in each instance denies the Indians' claims and wishes, and sanctions that of the British. *Seeta*, pp 212-23.
- 11 For a list of Steel's works, see Daya Patwardhan. *A Star of India*. Poona, India, A V Griha Prakashan, 1963, Appendix A and B.
- 12 As Indrani Sen notes, Steel drew on "a master/slave model reminiscent of Mannoni's infamous formulation, and identified a 'dependency complex' among the populace whom she stereotypically inscribed as effeminate/sensual, as children who needed, indeed wanted, to be mastered by the British who were natural masters", Sen, *Woman and Empire*, p 150.

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Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi in Colonial ‘Mutiny’ Fiction

Indrani Sen

THIS paper seeks to study inscriptions of the rani of Jhansi in a few colonial novels of the 19th and very early 20th centuries which touch upon the subject of the rani and the theme of the Rebellion of 1857. It seeks to probe the diversities of representations as well as perceptual shifts in these fictional works which were written during the period 1870s to 1900. These texts are by no means approached as “accurate” portrayals of the rani; rather they are “constructions”, or ideologically-loaded projections of reality instead of “reflections” of reality. As ideologically loaded portrayals of the rani these narratives perhaps reveal more about colonial perceptions than they do about their subject and in the process throw light on shifting colonial attitudes and ideologies.

THE MUTINY NOVEL

Arguably, the Rebellion of 1857, termed the “Epic of the Race” by the Victorians, was a landmark historical event that impacted 19th century colonial literary writing; it created the genre of the “Mutiny novel” which was hugely popular both in colonial India and in metropolitan Britain.¹ The event became the single most inspiring theme in fiction from the 1860s until the turn of the century (and through the 20th century as well) so that even 40 years later, colonial novelist Hilda Gregg could observe in a review article ‘The Indian Mutiny in Fiction’ in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1897: “Of all the great events of this century as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination”.² Written initially by India-based colonialists such as military officers and civil administrators, the genre enjoyed such instant success and

wide readership that popular authors in the metropole too, like G A Henty among others, churned out numerous romances on this theme.³

The strategic importance of this genre and its enormous popularity can be traced to post-“Mutiny” insecurities and anxieties and therefore the need to present epic narratives of British heroics and the solidarity of colonisers. The majority of these novels were romances of love and adventure which marked a clear polarisation between Indians/“mutineers” and the British, feeding into myths pertaining to race, culture, sexuality, power and gender. Racial and cultural stereotypes predominated, such as Asiatic cruelty, treachery, lechery (particularly towards white women) and British courage, manliness and the chivalric protection of women.

Thus, this genre essentially had the objective of establishing the moral as well as military superiority of the British. By circulating images and stereotypes about the “Mutiny”, colonial fiction such as these texts served to produce and circulate “colonial knowledge” about the events of 1857, the role of Indians, including rebel leaders, such as the rani of Jhansi in it, as well as the heroism of their own people, the British in India.

LAKSHMIBAI IN COLONIAL HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

Of all the rebel leaders who participated in the Rebellion, it was undoubtedly Lakshmibai, the rani of Jhansi, who fired the imagination of these authors. The colonial imagination was fascinated by the image of the fearless warrior woman who had fought with such audacious courage in battle. Colonial discursive writings on the “Mutiny” tended to imagine her in a manner that was quite distinct from other rebel leaders. Not only was she one of the few prominent female rebel leaders, but her story had many more romantic twists and turns in English eyes.

Several theories about the Revolt abounded in the 19th century colonial mind. It was variously held to have been caused by religious fears of conversion, by sepoy unrest, disaffection among the peasants and talukdars – and not least of all, by a yearning for lost power among the “native” princes. According to this perception, “native” rulers who held a grudge against the British, such as the Mahratta Nana Sahib of Satara

and Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, as well as other well known leaders like the moulvi of Faizabad, Firuz Shah, Tantia Tope, Rao Sahib and Kunwar Singh, had all come together under the overall symbolic leadership of the erstwhile Mughal emperor at Delhi in order to re-install the old political order.

In the historical real, Lakshmibai was born to poor Brahmin parents, Moropant Tambe and his wife Bhagirathi Bai. Her early life was spent in Benaras, Bithur and Bundelkhand where she was brought up with boys. One of her childhood playmates was her cousin, Nana Sahib. She thus received training early in her childhood in horse-riding, fencing, wrestling, hand-to-hand fight and firing guns.⁴ She became the second wife of Gangadhar Rao, the Maratha ruler of Jhansi whose family were traditionally British loyalists. Continuing this loyalist tradition, she was at first grateful to the English for preserving and augmenting the dynasty. But when Gangadhar Rao died in 1853, the British refused to recognise Damodar Rao, the raja's adopted son as the heir and successor in accordance with Hindu tradition and Dalhousie, the governor-general, annexed the state of Jhansi under the doctrine of lapse. Lakshmibai even hired a British lawyer to appeal her case in London. However, although these petitions were well-argued, they were ultimately rejected and the rani joined the Rebellion when the rebels reached Jhansi.

The role of the rani in the Rebellion has been the subject of great debate among modern historians, as perhaps has been the nature of the Rebellion itself. Nationalist historians, who sometimes term the Rebellion the “first war of independence” have traditionally tried to paint the rani as fiercely anti-British and anti-colonial and tried to appropriate her as a symbol of “nationalism” and patriotic resistance. Other historians like R C Majumdar have rescued her from the “nationalist” paradigm and revealed her to be more of a “reluctant rebel”, who joined the mutineers because of English intransigence in coming to her assistance. Majumdar noted that the rani “had to carry on a fight against her own kinsmen and rival Indian chiefs, and to the very last, i e, till at least March 1858 when the curtain was slowly falling over the great drama in north India, she was yet undecided whether she would fight against the British or make alliance with them”.⁵

Echoing this view more recently, historian Tapti Roy points out that long after the rebels had occupied and lost Delhi in

February 1858, the rani was still sending despatches to the local British for help. However, historians of all leanings are united in praising the heroism and courage with which she ultimately faced the English troops. Moreover, Roy also praises her ability to infuse loyalty in such diverse groups as the Bundela rajputs, Maratha brahmins, Afghan mercenaries and rebellious ‘purabiya’ soldiers.

Whatever the details might have been in reality, the fact remains that her successful attempt to resist relatives who staked their claims to the throne, her spirited efforts to restore her adopted son and assert her right over Jhansi have all been justly admired. Even more laudable was the will-power and determination that she displayed in resisting the governor-general’s rejection of her appeals – a determination summed up in her famed, although possibly apocryphal declaration, ‘Mein Jhansi nahi doongi’ (I will not give up Jhansi).

Colonial discussions about the rani essentially tended to focus on two aspects. The first was whether she had in fact been *driven* to revolt by the unfair treatment meted out to her by the British, culminating in the annexation of Jhansi. In other words, colonial discourse was often troubled by the awareness that the rani, who had been a loyal ally of the colonial government had been deeply wronged by them in this entire sordid saga of annexation. When imperial “Mutiny” historians John Kaye and George Malleson wrote in their *History of the Indian Mutiny* (1896), “Whatever her faults in British eyes may have been, her countrymen will ever believe that she was driven by ill-treatment into rebellion; that her cause was a righteous cause”, they were giving voice to this collective British guilt.⁶

The second question which evoked strong reactions among the British was whether she had been responsible for the massacre of about 60 English men, women and children who had taken shelter in one of the forts at Jhansi. These Europeans had later been killed after being promised safe conduct and the incident was regarded as an act of treacherous cruelty. In the colonial imagination this event stood second in its perfidy only to the Satichaura Ghat and Bibighar incidents at Cawnpore (Kanpur).

Nevertheless, she was not perceived as unambiguously “evil” as Nana Sahib to whom she was related.⁷ After all, Nana Sahib, called the “butcher of Cawnpore” by the colonialists, was

defined in the colonial imagination by the Satichaura Ghat incident where European men, women and children had been fired at and the Bibighar massacre of white women and children, supposedly at his orders. While colonialists no doubt located Lakshmibai as an “enemy”, who they believed was responsible for the Jhansi massacre, they nevertheless, simultaneously tended to view her in a more nuanced manner, as also a tragic figure who had been a victim of colonial policies of annexation and the doctrine of lapse.

In any case, controversy surrounded the incident of the massacre in colonial discursive writings. The rani always maintained that she was innocent of these killings but her protestations of innocence were never accepted by the British. Subsequent research, however, seems to support her claim. Eyewitness testimonies by European survivors, like Mrs Mutlow, later testified to the rani’s innocence.⁸ Yet another eyewitness, T A Martin subsequently wrote a letter to the rani’s son, Damodar Rao, saying that she “took no part whatever in the massacre of the European residents of Jhansi in June 1857. On the contrary, she supplied them with food for two days after they had gone into the fort”.⁹ However, such testimonies were generally disregarded in the post-“Mutiny” revenge hysteria, and, generally speaking, the rani entered colonial memory as a cruel “unwomanly” killer of innocent women and children.

On the other hand, the topic of the rani’s valour and courage did find mention in many colonial writings. One of the greatest admirers of the rani’s heroism was in fact the British officer who led the attack on her army in 1858 near Gwalior. General Hugh Rose, who was responsible for her defeat, termed her the “Indian Joan of Arc” and showered the highest praise on her as the “best and bravest of the rebel leaders”, going on to add that “the Indian Mutiny has produced but one man, and that man was a woman”.¹⁰ Indeed, his description of her appearance at that historic moment of her death later created what became the iconic image of the valorous warrior-queen: seated on horseback, clad in male clothes, sword held high. Rose noted: “The Rani of Jhansi ... was killed in this charge, dressed in a red jacket, red trousers, and white puggery; she wore the celebrated pearl necklace of Scindia which she had taken from his treasury, and heavy gold anklets”.

Early imperial “Mutiny historians”, like John Kaye and George Malleson too generally tended to echo this perception about her bravery. In their *History of the Indian Mutiny* (1896), they described her as “the resolute woman, who alike in council and on the field, was the soul of the conspirators. Clad in the attire of a man and mounted on horseback, the rani of Jhansi might have been seen animating her troops through the day.”¹¹ They further wrote: “Being young, vigorous, and not afraid to show herself to the multitude, she gained a great influence over the hearts of the people. It was this influence, this force of character, added to a splendid and inspiring courage, that enabled her to offer a desperate resistance to the British... To [her countrymen] she will always be a heroine.”¹²

Thus, in multifarious ways, the colonial imagination was fascinated by the image of the fearless warrior queen. Her heroic, larger-than-life image loomed over colonial discursive writings for the next few decades. British admiration in fact coincided with Indian valorisation of her legendary heroism – voiced in innumerable tales, poems, songs and folklore, including Hindi poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s famed poem with its refrain, ‘*khub larhi mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi*’ (Bravely fought the warrior queen of Jhansi).¹³

VALORIZING THE RANI: PHILIP MEADOWS TAYLOR’S MUTINY NOVEL *SEETA* (1872)

Possibly one of the most significant among the colonial novels of the 1870s was Philip Meadows Taylor’s “Mutiny” novel, *Seeta* (1872). Although the novel’s plot centred around the inter-racial love between the eponymous Hindu widow heroine and a British administrator against the background of the Revolt of 1857, it dealt closely with the theme of the Rebellion and addressed a number of issues connected with it, including the heightened racism that preceded the outbreak as well as local anger against interference with social customs pertaining to Indian women.¹⁴ In addition, it presented a rare, admiring inscription of the rani as a valorous and wronged woman, drawing upon the trope of the warrior-woman or ‘virangana’. In fact, the relative sensitivity with which Taylor approached many of the issues has led a present-day scholar like

Patrick Brantlinger to single out this text as “the most fully imagined account in any Victorian novel both of the scope and of the motives for the Mutiny”.¹⁵

As a leading colonial writer, Taylor was distinguished from his contemporary administrator-novelists by his benevolent, paternalistic admiration for Indian culture. Although he reportedly used his influence in the Berar region to avert a breakout of the rebellion and later helped the colonial troops with cattle and supplies, he was, at the same time, extremely critical of the East India Company’s policies. In his *Students’ Manual of the History of India* (1870) he declared that the “Koompany Bahadur” (East India Company) was in a state of moral decline and criticised the tampering with the hereditary privileges of the “talookdars of Oudh” (Awadh) and confiscation of their property by English settlement officers.¹⁶ In particular, he felt special sympathy for rani “Lukshmee Bye” and strongly censured the manner in which Jhansi, traditionally loyal to the British, had been annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse. In the subsequent period of British reprisals that followed, Taylor supported Canning’s policy of clemency and maintained that “as almost indiscriminate slaughter was carried on, that restraint was needed” (*ibid*, p 748).

Taylor bears a broad resemblance (without any actual links) to the group known as the “British Orientalists” which had consisted of scholars like William Jones and H T Colebrooke in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, who had contributed to the notion of a golden Vedic age and glorified India’s ancient history. During this period, i e, the 1860s and 1870s there seems to have been an interest in an old tradition in Indian history and literature of the noble warrior woman with her martial prowess. An article in *The Calcutta Review* in 1869 drew attention to what it termed as “the utter blank in the history of the female sex”.¹⁷ In a list of heroic queens which included “Baiza Baiee”, it mentioned the “Ranee of Jhansi” and praised her as “a woman of high spirit and conspicuous talent”.

In much the same vein, the image of the female fighter found valorisation in a romantic novel *Bismillah* (1869) written by colonial novelist “Hafiz” Allard. Although not otherwise on the subject of the Rebellion, it paid tribute to the courage of royal women like “the Queen of Jhansi, who died fighting gallantly

when her soldiers fled" as well as the Moghul Queen, Zeenut Mahal, whom it described as belonging to a hoary and noble line of "aspiring women".¹⁸

With his fascination for Indian history, Taylor too often drew upon this tradition of warrior-queens who had fought off enemies in order to save the land and the people.¹⁹ Many of his novels inscribe this favourite female prototype of his. In *The Noble Queen* (1878), for instance, he valorised "Chand Beebee", the 16th century queen of Bijapur as seated on horseback, "familiar with war", firm and dignified, yet kind and benevolent, and presented her as an inspiring ideal from the past.²⁰

In his "Mutiny" novel *Seeta* too Taylor inscribes the rani as a virangana. In one chapter devoted to delineating her role in the Rebellion, he describes the rani as "fair and handsome: with a noble presence and figure, and a dignified and resolute, indeed stern, expression."²¹ She is figured as an efficient ruler who sits "on the seat, or *Guddee*, of her deceased husband", spending her day "receiving reports, giving directions, hearing petitions, and comporting herself as a brave and determined woman had need to do in her position" (p 408).

In fact, with his deep sympathy for the rani, he projects her as a victim of British injustice and even betrayal. As she points out in an emotional outburst in the novel: "We loved the English; we hoisted their flag over our own, and it would have been there now, had their old justice been continued to us" (p 411). She complains bitterly against her acquisitive English adversaries who have "all the empire of Dehly belonging to them" and yet have greedily "refused to continue what they themselves had once granted to us" (p 411).

In other words, the narrative unequivocally blames British policies for the rani's transformation from friend to unforgiving foe. The text notes that "the people speak of her as gentle and loving once; but the English have wronged her deeply and she has thrown away her scabbard" (*ibid*, p 412). The result is that she is changed into "a very tigress at heart" (*ibid*, p 412), "brooding over her wrongs and her revenge, gloomy and vindictive" (*ibid*, p 412).

However, notwithstanding his deep sympathy for the rani, Taylor does subscribe to the view that she was indeed responsible for the massacre of the Europeans at the Fort. "Lukshmee Bye" herself admits in the novel that she had "spared none – no,

not one!" (p 411) of the English men, women and children. But at the same time the text seeks to attenuate her guilt by reminding us that this had been done in angry reprisal against British injustice. As she exclaims:

I, weak woman as I am, would have fought for them. No harm should have come near them that I, Lukshmee Bye, could have prevented. I would have taken those Englishwomen and their babes to my breast and held them there, truly and safely; while their husbands should have kept them and me against all enemies. Yes, I would have done this ... if they had been true (p 410).

The narrative closes with an adulatory account of her valorous death in combat. Pointing out that "in the subsequent operations" she "proved to be the most untiring, and perhaps the ablest of the rebel leaders" (p 415), it describes how, at the end, "she, and her sister, or companion, were slain, being dressed like men, in a charge by the 8th Hussars" (pp 415-16). Taylor, attempting accuracy, quotes Hugh Rose's famed words and salutes "the Ranee of Jhansy, who, although a lady, was the ablest and bravest military leader of the rebels" (p 416).

Taylor's inscription of the rani in his "Mutiny" novel *Seeta* thus fuses the paradigm of the virangana or warrior queen from Indian history with a strand drawn from contemporary imperial historiography which saluted the rani's valour. His novels are notable for scripting idealised women figures and in this context the adulatory delineation of Lakshmibai is in keeping with his race and gender ideologies.

CRUEL ASIATIC FEMALE RULER: A VIEW OF 'GILLEAN'S' ON THE RANE (1887)

However, it was not as though Taylor's perspective was the standard colonial one. Along with the occasional adulation, negative representations of the rani were also found, as in Charles Ball's famous *History of the Indian Mutiny* (1859) where the sketch, 'Massacre of English Officers and Their Wives at Jhansi' graphically depicted the agony of white women tied to trees, their clothes slashed off by sepoyos.²² In fact, over the next decade the image of the rani was generally scripted negatively in colonial discursive writings and later reports and accounts

tended to demonise the rebel queen. These later accounts of the 1880s and 1890s tended to dismiss Hugh Rose's adulterous descriptions of her valour by remarking that she was "just the sort of daredevil woman soldiers admire".²³ A report in *The Bombay Times* in 1885 described her as a Jezebel, as a handsome but lascivious she-fiend. It painted a lurid picture of her ordering her sepoys to humiliate and torture the white prisoners before killing them:

Shortly after, the whole of the European community, men, women, and children, were forcibly brought out of their homes; and, in presence of the Ranee, stripped naked. Then commenced a scene unparalleled in historical annals. She, who styles herself as "Ranee", ordered ... their being tied to trees at a certain distance from each other, and having directed the innocent little children to be hacked to pieces before the eyes of their agonised parents, she gave the women into the hands of the rebel sepoys, to be dishonoured first by them, and then handed over to the rabble...those who still lingered were put to death with the greatest cruelty, being severed limb from limb.²⁴

Later popular "histories" of the Rebellion of the late 19th and early 20th centuries too often cast a slur on the rani's "moral" character, as for instance George W Forrest's *History of the Indian Mutiny* (1904-1912), which described her as "intemperate" and "licentious" and also referred to her as the "Indian Jezebel".²⁵

In this context, contemporary perception of gender, especially the perceived role of Indian women in the "Mutiny" needs to be mentioned. "Mutiny"-related constructions about "native" women – prostitute or princess – were that they were cruel and treacherous. Prostitutes who were believed to have instigated the sepoys into revolt, "taunting them with their failure", were cited as examples of "native" female cruelty.²⁶ The British newspaper *News of the World* condemned them as "active instigators of the sepoys in their worst atrocities".²⁷ The colonial "Mutiny" novel too often represented begums and ranis stereotypically as licentious, manipulative, or sexually voracious.

Constructions about Lakshimbai too need to be located within this larger framework of race, class and gender perceptions. Representations of women in "Mutiny" writings tended to graft stereotypes about uncontrolled Indian female

sexuality/sensuality with that of "native" cruelty. The literary inscriptions of the rani which abound in a number of "Mutiny" novels – either through passing references or through detailed inscriptions – figure her as cruel and heartless, mocking at the white women in her captivity, or as lascivious and hungry for lovers. In some narratives she is figured as beautiful but also cruel.

Feeding into many of these gendered "Mutiny" myths is a late 19th century novel, *The Rane: A Legend of the Indian Mutiny* (1887) by "Gillean" (Col J N H Maclean), a British military officer who was reportedly stationed in India during the Revolt. Written almost a decade after Philip Meadows Taylor's "Mutiny" novel, it inscribes the rani as cruel, unscrupulous and ready to use her sexuality to manipulate her white enemies.

Maclean figures "Rane Luchmie Bhie of Ranepore" as possessing "a character better known for evil than for good".²⁸ While the novel does concede that she was politically ill-treated by the British colonial government, it indicates that she was, in any case, fundamentally evil: "Bad, however as she was, she might have pleaded ... that the treatment she had undergone ... was such as was calculated more to develop the evil that was in her, than the good" (p 16). But this tacit admission of British role in her revolt is not meant to mitigate her actions in any way.

At the novel's opening, the dying ruler of "Ranepore" (Jhansi), "Rajah Gungadhar Row" who is greatly "respected and loved by his subjects" (p 16) confides in "Shakespear", the British political officer at his court, with whom he has "a genuine and cordial friendship" (*ibid*, p 16), that his third wife, Luchmie Bhie is cruel and unscrupulous and should not succeed as ruler after his death. By projecting the old raja's dying wish to be that the rani should *not* be made the ruler or regent, the text erases the potentially weakest link in the rani of Jhansi case, viz, the possibility of her being perceived as a *victim* of British injustice. In short, the narrative makes annexation and the Doctrine of Lapse appear like a *service* to both "Ranepore" and the old raja on the part of the colonial government.

After the raja's death, Luchmie Bhie shows no hesitation in deploying her sexuality for staking her claims to Ranepore and appears one night before the political agent, covered

from head to foot, disguised as a man seeking an appointment – only to dramatically reveal herself, in all her dazzling beauty:

It was a face, which, when once seen, it would be difficult to forget, with jet-black liquid eyes, fringed with long sweeping eyelashes; a forehead giving promise of intelligence and determination; a beautifully chiselled aquiline nose, and a small exquisitely shaped mouth, but one which, if closely observed and studied, would give the idea that its possessor could be cruel and unsparing (23).

While the narrative does draw attention to the hints of cruelty on her face, her powerful sexuality exercises such a “magnetic influence” (p 25) on the political agent, that “[his] beautiful companion’s touch and near proximity sent a thrill of feeling through his whole body” (*ibid*, p 25). British colonial discourse projected the colonisers as dispensers of justice in the colonies and also as chivalric and knightly, protectors of women.²⁹ Cleverly manipulating this “English” sense of chivalry, the rani appeals to the political agent “in the name of justice” and asks him to “renounce your unjust determination to injure a helpless woman, and deprive her of her rights” (p 24).

The narrative insinuates that the meeting ends with her taking him as a lover for that night, “Shakespear and the lady were left in darkness to pursue their acquaintance ... to their mutual satisfaction” (p 26). However, this vilification of the rani’s “moral” character does not extend beyond this incident; in other words, it is not an uncontrollable sexuality, but a coldly calculated deployment of her sexuality for political gains that motivates her in this novel. The rani’s political machinations, however, eventually bear no fruit, since Shakespear’s role as political agent comes to an abrupt end, with a serious hunting accident the very next morning in which he suffers a concussion and proceeds to England on sick leave – with a new political officer named Plowden replacing him.

It is important to note that it is not for licentiousness but for cruelty and ruthlessness that the rani is critiqued in this narrative. The climax of her ill-deeds are centred around her ordering the massacre on the “fatal morning of the eighth of June 1857” (*p 223*) of a group of “men and helpless women and children – numbering in all sixty-four souls” (*ibid*, p 223) who had been “beleaguered and imprisoned within the walls of the famous old Fort of that city” (*ibid*, p 223). The British who had taken

possession of the fort of “Ranepore” had opened the gates on the written assurance signed by the rani of “safe and honourable protection and escort to Saugar” (p 227). This massacre is clearly under “the order of the Rane Luchmie Bhie and Ressaldar Sahb that the Faringee lague (sic) are to be killed” (p 228). What follows is a lurid delineation of the massacres written with the prurience that characterised much of “Mutiny” writing, and recalling the report in *The Bombay Times* that had appeared two years ago:

The ladies, the gentlemen, and the children were then stabbed and cut to pieces by the infuriated and blood-thirsty mob, which in several instances vented its rage and hatred, by hellish acts of cruelty almost unheard of, seizing helpless infants and children by the limbs, and – even before their mothers’ eyes – dashing out their brains against the stone wall surrounding the garden where the massacre took place (pp 228-29).

The novel ends on an almost hysterical note; as the Rebellion is quelled, the rebels scattered and the cruel rani killed, what remains is the abiding image of a memorial to the dead of Jhansi – “a tablet to their memory was erected to mark a spot quite as tragical and as well worthy a place in history as the well known blood-stained well of Cawnpore” (p 231). As Patrick Brantlinger has observed, the famous well at Cawnpore carried special resonance in colonial “Mutiny” iconography; thus, by invoking the image of the well, “Gillean’s” novel seeks to elevate the massacre at Jhansi to the same level.³⁰

The figuration of the androgynous warrior-queen in *The Rane* is made along the lines of cruelty, treachery and licentiousness – feeding into colonial race, class, caste, religious and gender constructs which were circulated by colonial writings of the late 19th century. Jenny Sharpe has argued that colonial constructions cast the rani “in a decidedly masculine role,” but it would be perhaps more accurate to locate the rani within the more complicated trope of *androgyny*, where alluring female sexuality and powers of seduction are seamlessly fused with masculine physical prowess and martial skills.³¹

Further, in the colonial imaginary Indian princely rulers were figured as cruel and despotic while British rule was routinely projected as enlightened and preferable. By mid-19th century Hindus, especially of the high-castes were imagined as highly intelligent, duplicitous, wily and treacherous. Thus Gillean’s novel with its negative projection of its Mahratta Brahmin rani

feeds into stereotypes of the cruel Asiatic ruler as well as that of the treacherous brahmin whose cleverness can only border on the cunning.

EROTIC FANTASIES:
THE QUEEN'S DESIRE (1893) BY HUME NISBET

The 1890s was the phase of “New Imperialism” which was marked by a cultural privileging of forcefulness and virile masculinity. In addition, there was also an incipient heightened racism, as is suggested by Joseph Chamberlain’s statement, “I believe in this race, the greatest governing race ... which will infallibly be the predominating force of future history and universal civilisation”.³² The relationship between coloniser and colonised was being re-cast as one based not on consent but on masculine force. Moreover, as Nancy Paxton points out in her reading of a few “Mutiny” novels of the 1890s which delineate the rani, that the phase of “New Imperialism” was both sexist and racist.

The 1890s saw a heightened activity in terms of the production of the “Mutiny” novel, with as many as 19 novels being published. In a recent study on “Mutiny” fiction Gautam Chakravarty notes that “the novels of the nineties say a good deal about the British self-image in India, as they are among the indices of a high imperial culture”.³³ He points out that “the rebellion now turns into a site of heroic imperial adventure, and an occasion for conspicuous demonstrations of racial superiority” (p 17). It has sometimes been argued that the early “Mutiny” literary texts of the 1850s and 1870s project white people sometimes as victim, whereas later novels of the New Imperialism phase of the 1890s tend to valorise British power and agency. Conversely, in order to underline British heroic agency, it becomes equally necessary to negate or undermine the valour of the “native” mutineers.

It has also been rightly pointed out that the rani’s courage and valour were “troublesome to triumphal British histories”.³⁴ Thus, in a romance of the 1890s, *The Queen's Desire: A Romance of the Indian Mutiny* (1893) written by Hume Nisbet, a metropolitan adventure-fiction writer, textual strategies of representation are directed at disempowering the warrior rani. In the

colonial imaginary colonised women were eroticised as sexually compliant, excitingly sensual, subservient and eager to please. Written almost 40 years after the Revolt of 1857 this novel figures the rani as sensual and promiscuous, thereby feeding into these colonial myths of “native” female sensuality and subservience.

Her first appearance in the text is a dramatic one. As a group of rowdy British soldiers try to sexually molest some “native” women accompanying a palanquin (‘palki’) in old Delhi, a woman – who unknown to them, is the rani – emerges from inside the palki. Her appearance at first spells eastern sensuality, she is scripted as a glorified dancing-girl or courtesan, wearing a “rich nautch-dress, with its flashing jewels...and gold-spangled gauze veil which floats about her in the night air”.³⁵ However, this sensual image is complicated soon after by one of martial spiritedness, as with a swift movement this warrior-woman cuts off the head of one of the assailants with her ‘tulwar’.

After the “Mutiny” breaks out at Meerut, the rani captures Sergeant George Jackson, the novel’s lower-class hero and confines him in a dungeon, but soon finds him so sexually irresistible that she transforms the underground chamber into a sensual love-nest – where she even dances like a nautch-girl for his entertainment. Colonial novels were often undergirded by fantasies of race, class, sexuality, gender and power, where Indian beloveds of white males often embodied the colonised land itself, emotionally and sexually conquered.³⁶

In this novel too, in an inversion of power-relationships, the besotted rani is erotically subjugated by her mad infatuation for the low-class Englishman, to the extent that she even wishes to marry him. By scripting Jackson’s mastery over the rani who is both queen and foremost female rebel leader, the narrative seeks to privilege British masculinities and its agency over Indian feminine passivity. Furthermore, like other “Mutiny” narratives delineating Indian princes, this text too seeks to establish the “native” rulers’ moral, sexual, racial inferiority and to inscribe the Rebellion as a triumph of the “middle class” colonisers over “oriental voluptuaries”.³⁷

However, despite her infatuation for this low-born Englishman, the rani’s resolve to fight the British does not in any way

lessen, neither does her inveterate hatred for them as she actively conspires with Nana Sahib, the Mughal badshah in Delhi and the Maulvi of Fazabad to kill the British. Indeed, after Jackson's interest in her – which is merely sexual – lessens, he manages to get away from her and it is much later that he, now married to an English girl, encounters the rani on the battlefield at the siege of Gwalior. Not recognising her, clad as she in "chain armour" (p 305), with "her head covered with a golden helmet crowned with blazing jewels" (*ibid*, p 305), he kills her in combat and it is her dying words that reveal her real identity:

The lovely dark eyes opened as he uncovered that beautiful face and the lips that had once so passionately kissed him smiled again tenderly, as she said faintly ... "Your wife, George – your first wife, my lord and master. She who was the Ranee of Jhansi, and gave you her heart to split" (p 306).

In 19th century colonial discourse the image of the devoted Indian wife and "native" wifely sacrifice occupied a special place. The narrative thus transforms the legendary warrior-queen, celebrated for her valour, into an abandoned wife, a love-sick woman, dying, unrequited in love:

That passionate, erring, but human heart had pumped out its last drop, and George Jackson, the heir to the Rajah's fortune, held in his arms the inanimate remains of what had been a queen (p 307).

As he kills her unwittingly, he is overcome with guilt; "a mighty trembling" falls upon him, as "for the first time...he felt like a murderer, and grew weak with the horror of the situation" (p 306).

Thus the novel locates the rani within the dual constructs of excitingly sensual "native" mistress and faithful Indian wife. By the novel's end the sensual mistress has seamlessly changed into the 'pativrata' (devoted wife), the faithful, even abject, Indian wife, for whom death is all the sweeter if it is at her lord's hands. Furthermore, the narrative valorises English male agency and Eastern female passivity by showing the defeat of the rani twice over at the hands of the novel's hero; she is first erotically "conquered" by him and later this great female warrior is defeated in battle at Gwalior.

We have noted until now how Lakshmibai was represented negatively in much of the colonial (and metropolitan) fiction

from the decade of the 1860s down to the 1890s. Successive novels seemed to have inscribed her in ever-darker shades of moral obliquity. However, there is by no means a linear or schematic pattern of increasing moral degradation in the textual representation of the rani through 30-odd years which constitute the period we are looking at. On the contrary, within this pattern one finds contradictions, ambiguities and complexities that arguably prevent a linear reading of these texts.

‘NATIONALIST’ VIRANGANA:

THE JEANNE D’ARC OF INDIA (1901) BY MICHAEL WHITE

A striking case in point is an adulatory turn-of-the-century novel, *Lachmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi: The Jeanne D’Arc of India* (1901). Published in the US rather than in Britain like most colonial fiction and authored by Michael White (possibly an American), it is understandably less rooted than most “Mutiny” novels in British colonial perceptions and prejudices. In this highly romanticised text “Lachmi Bai, the disinherited Rani of Jhansi” (p 4) is figured as a young and beautiful princess who had been “affianced” (that is to say, only betrothed, and not married) to the late raja and “deprived ... of my inheritance of the throne of Jhansi” (p 15).³⁸

In retelling the history of the rani, the text transforms her from the dignified, widowed queen of historical accounts into a dazzling young unmarried “princess”, who combines “beauty and high spirit” (p 110) and is proclaimed “Rani of Jhansi” by her adoring people and – after her brief power struggle with one of her own officers – it is spontaneously declared that the “Raj is the Rani’s” (p 35). However, her beauty conceals – as the British Commissioner negotiating with her at the beginning soon discovers – “a strength of character emphasised in every line of her distinctly Aryan features, a force of will...warning him at the outset that he had to deal with no shrinking, simple, zanana maiden” (p 11).

It is striking that the rani – despite several ardent admirers – remains sexually chaste and celibate. This is in sharp contrast to the images of licentiousness that, as we saw, “Mutiny” fiction usually scripted around her. In fact her celibacy is juxtaposed with the indolent sensuality of the “voluptuous...ladies of the

zanana", the "wives and concubines" (p 259) of Sindhia, who are "inclined to regard her as a bold creature of less than doubtful virtue, otherwise she could not consort so openly with men" (*ibid*, p 259). She is said to be "far removed from the generally accepted type of her countrywomen" (p 11) and her rejection of purdah and her free interactions with her people displays far "greater personal freedom" than was traditionally observed even "on the part of the Maratha ladies" (p 110).

Most importantly perhaps from a western perspective, the narrative absolves the rani altogether of the massacre of the Europeans – something which even Taylor's otherwise adulatory novel had not done. The killing is attributed to one of her treacherous officers who had given false assurances of "protection" in her name – and had been believed by the Europeans because "[t]he rani had ever been regarded as an upright woman. Upon the faith of her word they opened the gates and laid down their arms" (p 23). In fact, when she later learns about the incident, the rani with "her womanly repugnance to ruthless slaughter" (p 25), reacts with dismay: "To kill the innocent, the already defeated, did not occupy a thought in her mind. The news came swift and ominous...a tragedy taken place" (*ibid*, p 25).

The narrative does detail the pathos of their death but unlike in many lurid "Mutiny" accounts – including the 1880s "eyewitness" report in *The Bombay Times* mentioned earlier in this paper – the incident is delineated with restraint:

Then...they marched out to a field nearby, a pitiful, defenseless band, of men, women, and children. The sun never shone upon a more brutal tragedy.

Beside a clump of trees all were ruthlessly butchered. Their honour alone was spared. Without a plea for mercy, without a cry of anguish, these heroes met a cruel fate, that might have been averted by a less exacting government (pp 23-24).

As the events of the novel unfurl, and intrigue follows counter-intrigue inside the rebel camp, the rani's courage impresses even her enemies, such as the pro-British Mahratta ruler Sindhia: "During the year past, Sindhia had heard much of the redoubtable Princess of Jhansi. He had been told of her beauty, her wisdom, and her valor" (p 248). Indeed, later on when the "Foreigners" (i e, the British) see her courage and her

intelligence, they admire her as “a second Jeanne D’Arc” (p 287). They, in fact, find her “as valiant in battle, more subtle in council than the Maid of Orleans” (*ibid*), and realise that she has “cast in their teeth a wager of defiance, to stand until either they were driven from her state, or she had perished” (*ibid*, p 287).

This image of the warrior woman is overtly drawn from western chivalric traditions and the paradigm of warrior-maidens in European history. In particular, it invokes the 15th century French Joan of Arc, who had fought the English at the end of the Hundred Years’ War. Interestingly, the novel’s subtitle carries echoes from General Hugh Rose’s terming the rani “Joan of Arc” in his account written nearly 50 years ago. Besides this symbolism, also reproduced in the text is general Rose’s iconic description of the rani clad in red-coloured male attire and wearing a white “puggery”. When she joins the rebel leaders Rao Sahib and Tantia Topi at Kalpi in the novel she appears dressed as “a young officer” with a “white turban” and “attired in a blood-red uniform from head to foot” (p 212).

In fact, this trope of the fearless female fighter also situates her firmly in the tradition of the *virangana*, the warrior princess. After 30 years since Taylor’s 1870s novel *Seeta*, the trope of the rani as *virangana* is foregrounded in this text; she is a skilled horsewoman, she longs “[t]o be a man and ride forth sword in hand, to battle; to hear the cannon roar” (p 59). Later, when she faces Sindhia in battle, fully armed, wearing a “Persian cap of steel, richly ornamented with figures of beaten gold, a spike of the same precious metal, and feathery aigrettes. Her hands and wrists...protected by gauntlets of metal scale work” (p 255), she appears as “one of those intrepid Maratha warriors, who had defied the power of the great Mogul” (*ibid*, p 255).

However, in reifying the image of the warrior woman, there is one significant difference; while Taylor had presented her as a mature woman, stern and dignified, Michael White’s novel re-casts her as a young, warrior-“maiden”, an *unmarried* princess (the betrothed, not the wife, of the dead raja) whose virginity in fact remains intact since her love for Prasad, a young Hindu aristocrat remains “noble” and unconsummated till the end.

Indeed, this image of the female fighter is multilayered and can be read as also carrying resonances of India’s anti-imperialist

struggle. Historically, the early 20th century saw the emergence of a militant nationalism in Bengal and elsewhere. By underlining the rani's chastity and celibacy, the text feeds into what one may call the trope of the "celibate warrior", the image of which was intrinsic to the paradigm of militant nationalism. This ideal was defined by the values of martial prowess, muscular strength, a readiness to go to battle, moral fortitude and the unshaken resolve to defend the nation.³⁹

To some extent this idealised militant figure, with its political symbolism of the independence movement, can be seen as drawing its mythic roots also from heroic Hindu goddesses like Durga and Kali, images of whom inspired the Indian National Movement. In the text the iconography of Hindu goddesses undergirds people's diverse perceptions of the rani: the adoring local populace see her as "an incarnation of the glorious Uma" (p 259); while her fleeing enemies, when she enters Gwalior after defeating Sindhia in battle, attribute her power to the "sinister Durga, under whose protection...she was preserved from death". It is said that she "grew in their eyes to be a terrible, awe inspiring figure" (*ibid*, p 259).

Thus, interestingly enough, the figuration of the rani in this novel feeds into what may be called an "Indian Nationalist" paradigm of patriotism and anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, at the end, when the rani lies mortally wounded in her tent, her dying words express a "passionate love for her country" (p 287), as she bids farewell in a patriotic outburst, " 'O India,' she cried ... 'farewell' " (p 295), prophesying a future of liberation from colonial domination: " 'A day will come when their law shall be no longer obeyed, and our temples and palaces rise anew from their ruins' " (p 295). Although, as historians point out, the concept of "India" as a "nation" did not exist in 1857, the period of the turn of the 20th century when this novel was written (1901, to be precise), did in fact witness an intensification in the Indian national movement, culminating in the partition of Bengal in 1905. By figuring the rani as voicing patriotic sentiments for "India" rather than love for Jhansi alone ('Mein Jhansi nahi doongi'), the text projects her as an embodiment of patriotism. As she comes to be inscribed as an icon of anti-colonial resistance, the narrative does seem to gesture at a conceptualisation of the "Mutiny" as the "First War of Independence".⁴⁰

The rani's death itself is mystic and spiritual, rather in keeping with European chivalric traditions of the west; mortally wounded, she is laid, at her request, to die quietly alone in her tent with the request that "no Foreign eye doth gaze upon my body after I am dead" (p 294):

In a little, a wail of lamentation rose across the intervening space between the camps of the two armies. The Foreign soldiers asked its meaning of one another.

The answer might have been that the spirit of the heroic Lachmi Bai had been gathered to the protecting arms of Parameswara, the merciful, the just, the all supreme God, alike of the Hindu, the Mohammedan, and the Christian.

The Rani of Jhansi was dead (pp 295-296).

Thus, as we have seen, Michael White's strikingly unconventional novel *Lachmi Bai*, breaks free from the stereotypes of cruelty, treachery and sensuality usually associated with the rani in the colonial "Mutiny" novel. Instead, it goes even beyond Taylor's sympathetic scripting of the rani as a deeply wronged person and presents her in an idealised manner. As its title suggests, it attempts to situate Lakshmibai in the mould of Joan of Arc, who was associated with driving out the English from her land and the suggestion is that the chaste rani will similarly drive out the English occupiers of her beloved country. Moreover, it gives greater multilayered depth to the trope of the heroic virangana that Taylor had used 30 years ago. It enriches the concept of the fearless "woman warrior" by intermeshing various strands drawn from European and Indian traditions of the courageous female fighter who resists evil and oppression.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we saw in this paper how the image of the rani of Jhansi was etched diversely in colonial literary discourse in the 19th century. Numerous colonial "Mutiny" novels that appeared in the 30-year period stretching from the 1870s-1900 inscribed the historical figure of the rebel queen variously. A scrutiny of four novels threw up fascinating features. The majority of the novels represented Lakshmibai within colonial race, class and gender stereotypes. They figured her as cruel and licentious and circulated colonial stereotypes about the

“Mutiny” in order to disseminate “colonial knowledge” about the events of 1857 as well as the rani’s role in it. However, there were two unusual novels which were written right at the beginning and the end of this period which presented her with sympathy and admiration. Both of these texts, Philip Meadows Taylor’s famous novel *Seeta* (1872) and the lesser-known *Lachmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi* (1901) by Michael White, drew upon the paradigm of the virangana or warrior-woman, and indeed, the latter novel which appeared at the turn of the century went further and projected her as a patriotic and fearless freedom fighter in a manner that fed into Indian nationalist iconography.

NOTES

- 1 The 1857 Rebellion triggered off a host of novels, starting with Lt Col Edward Money’s, *The Wife and the Ward or Life’s Error* (1859). For a comprehensive list of 19th century “Mutiny” fiction see Shailendra Dhari Singh, *Novels on the Indian Mutiny*, Arnold-Heinemann, New Delhi, 1973, pp 230-31.
- 2 Hilda Gregg, ‘The Indian Mutiny in Fiction’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol 161, No 400, February 1897, p 218.
- 3 G A Henty’s, ‘Mutiny’ novels include *In Times of Peril* (1888), *In the Days of the Mutiny* (1893) and *Rujub the Juggler* (1893).
- 4 For biographical details see Tapti Roy, *Raj of the Rani*, Penguin, London, 2006.
- 5 R C Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963, p 427. It might be noted that in some respects Majumdar is considered a “nationalist” historian but not in his understanding of the rani.
- 6 Cited in Michael White, *Lachmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi: The Jeanne D’Arc of India*, J F Taylor and Co, New York, 1901, frontispiece, no pagination.
- 7 See G O Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, 1865, Reprint, Indus/Harper Collins, New Delhi, 1992.
- 8 See Joyce Lebra-Chapman, *The Rani of Jhansi: A Study in Female Heroism in India*, Jaico Publishing House, Delhi, 1988, p 67.
- 9 T A Martin, in John Venables Sturt, “Memoirs”, Eur MSS C 195, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library. Cited in Lebra-Chapman, *Rani of Jhansi*, p 67.
- 10 General Hugh Rose, June 23, 1858, Rose Papers-XLI. Add MSS 42812, November 1857-October 1859, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library; cited in Lebra-Chapman, pp 113-14.
- 11 G B Malleson (ed), *Kaye’s and Malleson’s History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58*, 6 vols, 2nd ed, Longmans Green and Co, London, 1898, cited in Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p 73.
- 12 Cited in Michael White, *Lachmi Bai*.

- 13 Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-48), Hindi poet, freedom fighter and author of the famous composition "Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai", was also one of the earliest women who joined the Satyagraha movement.
- 14 For a discussion of Taylor's *Seeta* see Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858-1900*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002, pp 104-30.
- 15 Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1988, p 212.
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THE ARTS AND 1857

1857 and Ideas about Nationhood in Bengal Nuances and Themes

Swarupa Gupta

1857 continues to have a mesmeric hold over the Indian imagination for a number of reasons. The reasons are connected to the divergent ways in which this iconic event has been portrayed in historiographies of modern India, and to the debates that have come to surround its nature and nomenclature. Viewed through multiple prisms, the interpretative spectrum encompasses “sepoy mutiny”, “civil rebellion”, “rural insurgency having an elitist character”, “feudal reaction”, “national war” and so on.¹ On the 150th anniversary of this great event in Indian history, perhaps what captures popular imagination most is the link between 1857 and nationalism. It has been regarded as a unique moment in India’s history when the soul of the nation awoke from slumber to oppose alien rule. The state memorialisation of 1857 draws on such powerful representations. Voices of dissent, however, dispel the dream of annexing the events of 1857 to the meta-narrative of Indian nationalism.² These events, they say, did not represent a single resistance/single past of one people. The story was of many pasts. In these pasts, ideological strands implicating diverse notions of identity and nationhood remained embedded. Expressions of the latter varied considerably across regions and temporal frames. This paper focuses on one set of expressions and ideas by finding out what happened in Bengal during this period.

I

NATIONHOOD, RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY DEFINING THE ‘NATIONAL’ ELEMENT IN 1857

Links between resistance movements/mutinies/rebellions concerned with opposition of alien authority on the one hand, and

nationhood/identity on the other have been sought by historians and nationalist leaders across the world, at different phases of history. More often, such linkages and connections are written back into the narrative of resistance, which in retrospect becomes “national”, having an inspirational value for later-day uprisings. The Mutiny – in other places the Revolt – of 1857 was no exception. Though localised in that it did not include all regions or segments of people, the Revolt has been written into the history of Indian nationalism in a variety of ways. The theoretical stance can be related especially to Afro-Asian contexts of nationalism, where the “roots of the modern-educated elite and modern-style politics are shallowest”, making it possible to argue a historical connection between modern political activities and traditional resistance movements. One can even “assert the existence of a permanent, underlying ‘ur-nationalism’ which manifested its hostility to the European presence in a distinct series of historical forms”.³

Contemporaneous descriptions and later representations casting the Revolt in a nationalist mould continue to be valorised, re-interpreted and grafted into later narratives, glossing internal differences and fragmentations in ideological terrains. The purpose here is to mediate between the different strands of nationalist interpretation and then situate them in a critical and comparative analysis vis-a-vis Bengal. The ways in which the “national” element was perceived in the Revolt (by contemporary observers, and later historians) have varied. Contemporaneous descriptions of the Revolt as “a national Revolt” (by Marx),⁴ and Disraeli’s famous interrogation as to whether it was a mere “military mutiny” or a “national Revolt” fired the imagination of Indians. The strongest expression in this regard was Savarkar’s early 20th century depiction of the Revolt as “the Indian War of Independence of 1857”, founded on the twin principles of ‘swadharma’ and ‘swaraj’, aiming to achieve freedom through the help of a secret organisation.⁵

Turning from such extreme positions, I argue through a case study of Bengal that the “national” element in 1857 had subtler and more nuanced reflections. In doing so, I also demonstrate how “national” had different connotations in the actual Mutiny-Revolt that flared in north and central India (the “mentality of the mutiny” in a general, pan-Indian sense), and in more muted

regional reactions and representations elsewhere in India, specifically in Bengal. Recent years have seen more nuanced appreciations of the “national” element embedded in the “mentality of the mutiny”. Rajat Kanta Ray has argued that it represented the inchoate social nationality of Hindustan, an embryonic nationhood that was very different from the idea of a political nation built on modern associational values, popularised by the Indian National Congress.⁶ It was a patriotic war waged for the protection of ‘deen’ (realm) and ‘dharma’ (faith). Though couched in a religious idiom, the remarkable point was that this battle against the ‘kafir’ (the infidel English) .. acquired a “national” character because it united the Hindus and Muslims through allegiance to the country, and participation in a common struggle.⁷ The use of religion as an idiom was underlined in earlier accounts too. Construing the Revolt as a social revolution that was the “source-spring of our national movement”, P C Joshi argued that the threat of conversion helped promote unity of feeling along religious lines.⁸ While Joshi emphasised the religious factor from the angle of conversion, and Ray underlined it in conjunction with Hindu-Muslim unity and attachment to land (Hindustan), Nandalal Chatterjee argued that the remarkable unity between Hindus and Muslims sustained this patriotic war containing seeds of political nationalism.⁹

This essay approaches the “national” question from a slightly different angle, assessing how in the Bengali literati’s discourse,¹⁰ expressions of “national” during 1857 and in the following period, came to be woven around the conceptual category of ‘samaj’ (social collectivity).¹¹ By focusing on the literati’s deployment of samaj, I argue that though actual protest was muted, and armed opposition absent, the events and ideologies of 1857 influenced patterns and trajectories of response that could also be fitted into a “national” paradigm. The emphasis here is on the intertwining of ideas of nationhood and samaj in the wake of 1857, and in explaining how ideas about history of place, memorialisation and attachment to land, Hindu-Muslim unity, and crucially, patterns of conduct (a major criterion for inclusion in a wider samaj/a pan-Indian social universe) – were refracted and redefined through this conceptual conjunction.

II

PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGIES AND LABELS:
'LOYALIST'/'REBEL'

The question that leaps to mind is: how can we talk about nationhood and mentalities of dissent in a "loyalist" Bengal? The use of labels – "loyalist"/"rebel" (in an implicit sense) dates back to British approaches to the Revolt as early as May 1857, and increased after its suppression when they were anxious to distinguish friend from foe. In May 1857, the *Bengal Hurkaru* implicitly distinguished between "traitor" and "loyalist": "We judge by private letters received from the Northwest and from the people... the disaffection existing amongst the native troops seems to have spread far and wide... the British Government is powerful enough to put down *traitors* by a strong hand."¹²

Problems of simplistic demarcation of "loyalist"/"rebel" were apparent even in so-called "loyalist" areas such as Bengal. The "loyalism" of the Bengali intelligentsia contained an internal dilemma. Though the western-educated middle classes remained aloof, and even condemned the sepoys, professing loyalty to the British because of their "material interests in the new order, and their ideological commitment to new ideas,"¹³ the polarisation of "loyalist"/"rebel" needs to be reviewed and qualified. As E I Brodkin has pointed out: "...while in some instances this terminology can serve a useful purpose, perhaps more often than not the simplistic categorisation of the Indian actors in the drama as loyal or rebel serves mainly to confuse."¹⁴

The Revolt of 1857 was not a simple movement but a complex one. As said, its emotional and ideological ramifications and reactions varied across regions. Within regions too, there were internal shifts and variations. Even among the so-called "collaborators" there was no uncritical or unconditional acceptance of colonial rule. The Calcutta intelligentsia felt what the *Hindoo Patriot* described as "grievances inseparable from subjection to foreign rule."¹⁵ Their loyalism sprang more from the head than the heart.¹⁶ Even "loyalists" such as Durgadas Bandyopadhyay who fought on the British side against the sepoys in Bareilly could not deny the unprecedented way in which spirit of the rebellion spread across India:

The Sepoy Revolt did not take place only in Bareilly. The fire of rebellion spread to different places in India – Bengal, Bihar, the North

West, Ayodhya, Lucknow, Punjab and Central India. Everywhere, in the same way, at the same time, everyone voiced a common demand: "We do not want the British, destroy the British rajya [realm], whenever you see an Englishman, kill him."¹⁷

Though Durgadas is perhaps wrong in saying that people in different places including "loyalist" areas such as Bengal and Punjab voiced their discontent in the same way, what is significant here is that a common feeling of discontent pervaded India. Its expressions were different – armed rebellion, veiled criticism, dilemmas within loyalism, and contradictory strands in the same personality.¹⁸

What is remarkable is that the literati were aware of the loyalist dilemma/ambivalence and its cause. Such awareness continued well into the associational phase of politics in Bengal, and was expressed succinctly in 1878: "This meeting [at the Town Hall of Calcutta] has furnished sufficient materials for coming to the conclusion that Bengalis can be loyal to the backbone but at the same time they can defend the rights and privileges... in a firm... way."¹⁹ It is clear that they did not consider such loyalty as an impediment to the defence of rights and privileges. Rather, the discontent that lay at the heart of the loyalist dilemma was regarded as a harbinger of improvement and progress: a spur to quests for an empowered identity.

Whatever of moral or material progress India has been able to achieve under the British rule has been owing to discontent, itself the result of advanced thought and cultivated feeling. A nation, like an individual...acquires a sense of its duties only in experiencing adversity. Moments of sorrow...are the most precious moments of individual as well as national life.²⁰

1857 was such a moment of adversity. It represented the culmination of a long process of subjugation and consequent unrest. As the impact of that subjugation, and of British rule in general, was differential (uneven over different regions), so reactions also varied. But they stemmed from a common discontent. Contemporaries in Bengal (in 1857) viewed the armed rebellion in north and central India and the situation in Bengal as two expressive facets and results of the same discontent. The forms were different, but connected by the ideological thread of an oppositional mentality. Opposition need not

always be overt or armed: in Bengal, anti-British feeling found expression in a critical stance manifested in moves toward redefinitions of identity.²¹

While actual participation in the Revolt did not occur, 1857 acted as a catalyst/turning-point that helped earlier ideas about identity acquire new resonances. The two arenas: the events, antagonisms and mentalities of the Revolt that swept north and central India on the one hand, and reactions in Bengal on the other were interpenetrative domains because – (i) they expressed reactions that stemmed from a feeling of discontent; (ii) the events, ideologies and spirit of the Revolt influenced ideas about identity in Bengal. Before analysing the specific ways in which ideas about identity acquired new resonances from the spirit of 1857, I explore why and how the reaction to discontent was different in Bengal.

III

1857: A LINK IN A CHAIN OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In Bengal, the perception of discontent/adversity led to a heightened social awareness and an urge for recasting self-identity. Ideas about the improvement and progress of samaj became the means of redefining and articulating the nationalist imagination by an intelligentsia torn by conflicting feelings of loyalty to the British on the one hand, and a deep and burning need for self-expression on the other. Viewed from this angle, the present essay is a meaningful intervention aiming to show how nationality enmeshed with ‘samajik’ identities and notions of progress in the wake of 1857, and followed a unique trajectory that did not clash with loyalist positions defined contextually. By the turn of the century, 1857 (in retrospect) had become a crucial link in a chain of social transformation, and attitudes were markedly anti-colonial. By then the cumulative effect of the Black Acts (1849), the Vernacular Press Act (1879) and the Ilbert Bill Controversy (1883) led to a rethinking of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. In the changed socio-cultural climate, 1857 acquired a new significance and was part of a socially-transformative chain. As Shibnath Shastri remarked:

The period from 1856-1861 can be termed as a ‘mohendrakhon’ [momentous phase of many opportunities and changes]. During this

phase, widow remarriage agitation, the Indian Mutiny, Indigo Revolt, the emergence of Harish Chandra Mukherjee, the publication of *Som Prakash*... the emergence of Michael Madhusudan in the literary scene, Keshabchandra's entry into the Brahmo Samaj – all infused new life into society, and energised and deeply impacted the Bengali samaj. Therefore, it is important to study in detail, the history of each of these.²²

The idea also found expression in Ajitkumar Chakrabarty's biography of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. The Revolt of 1857 sparked off a new phase in the socio-political history of Bengal: "When Debendranath descended from the Himalayas, the Sepoy Mutiny was going on. The fire of the Revolt died down, but it sowed a new seed in the soil of Bengal... the beginning of this new phase can be regarded as an outcome of the conflagration of 1857."²³

1857 opened up a space for the reconfiguration of nation, people and land. It speeded a search for identity that enmeshed with, and complemented efforts at 'jatiya' uplift through self-help (an idea present since 1839 in the deliberations of the Tattvabodhini Sabha) and the forging of unities between Bengalis and other Indians (concretely expressed in the Hindu Mela's agenda). This signified social progress, which was a composite idea and movement (as seen in Shibnath's links) containing many interactive currents. The orientation was different from that of the rebels of north and central India for it did not look back to a shattered past even while seeking to establish a new order. It recreated the past in the image of the present and the future. In fact, the notion of a nation was produced through a complex interaction between re-orientations of past unities and the circumstances of the modern (late colonial) period. 'Jatipratishtha' (bringing the collective self into existence) through social progress viewed the nation as a cultural unit²⁴ historically rooted in the evolution of samaj, and prioritised a "new" history woven around samaj. As political history was ruptured due to the absence of reliable sources, there was a turn toward a history of culture and attachment ('samajik itihas'), which could provide an imaginative unity to the past and bring the collective self into existence. The concern here is to show, how 1857 speeded and helped recast ideas about samajik history entwining with nationhood.

IV

1857 IN HISTORY: AN UNPRECEDENTED EVENT

History and identity were inextricably intertwined in the Bengali imagination, and gathered momentum especially through a quest for a “new” history that could effectively challenge colonial allegations of being a history-less people.²⁵ The literati situated the Mutiny-Rebellion in history both as an unprecedented event, and as a link in a wider, socially-transformative process. History and identity being closely interlinked, the location of 1857 in history may be said to reflect the glimmerings of nationhood, rooted in the past.²⁶ The events and spirit of 1857 were oriented to a wider agenda of recasting identity through a “new” samajik history, which gathered momentum from the cultural-nationalism of the Hindu Mela (1867), and was articulated powerfully in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s classic essays in the *Bangadarshan* (during the 1880s).

Rajanikanta Gupta, even while professing loyalty to the British emphasised the cataclysmic nature of the Revolt, regarding it as an unprecedented event in history and comparing it to past struggles:

Since the fateful day when the unlucky Siraj-ud-daula was defeated due to the conspiracy of the enemy, and the authority of the British Company was established in Bengal through the cunning of Lord Clive..., there has been no such violent and cataclysmic occurrence as the Revolt. Never has the foundation of colonial authority been shaken to such an extent, nor have the British faced such great trouble, and witnessed at every moment the manifestation of such violent power. From Meerut to Delhi, and from Delhi to the north-west, there was...a wild conflagration.²⁷

Rajanikanta situated 1857 within a historical frame of popular memory and past glory. The story of how the sepoys attacked Delhi was part of a wider description of a historic Delhi – a Delhi of past glory eternalised in popular memory. Through a fascinating oscillation between the past and the present, Rajanikanta, related the struggles of 1857 to past glory and instances of valour.

The ancient history of Delhi is a fascinating tale of many events. Even now, the remembrance of this wonderful past lingers in popular imagination and memory. Delhi was the favourite residence of the hero Prithviraj, the pleasure-arena of the illustrious Mughal emperor Akbar,

however, during the 50 years preceding the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny, the Mughal emperor lost his power and possessions and came under the sway of the British Company. But the glory of his name, family, prestige and authority has not entirely faded. The power, glory and the wide realms of Akbar, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb were redrawn in the canvas of popular memory in 1857.²⁸

The past was thus an inspiration for the present and also for the future. Harishchandra Mukherjee believed "history would see and evaluate the great Indian Revolt in a manner wholly different from how contemporaries in 1857-1858 viewed it."²⁹ This belief was expressed even more eloquently towards the end of 1858, when an article in *Hindoo Patriot* reflected a unique interlocking of 1857 with history, nationhood and popular memory:

The events of the last few years... the repeated conquests and the still more frequent annexations, and last of all the mutinies and the rebellion, have familiarised the nation with ideas... minds are more impressionable... Such events as a rebellion... constitute a very remarkable chapter in any history, and make indelible impressions on the minds of any people. On the minds of the people of India in their present temper, their effect would be such as to last for generations to come.³⁰

From this centrality of situating 1857 in history emanate several associated themes as enunciated below.

V

HISTORY OF PLACE AND MEMORIALISATION OF HOMELANDS

The "new" history of culture and attachment gathered momentum in the wake of the Revolt, and engaged with a history-led refinement of place and the land. 1857 was crucial in this regard in three main ways – (i) connection of place to its history; (ii) connection of place to the people; and (iii) a complex concatenation of people, place/land and conduct, reflected in juxtapositions of Bengal to specific places within India.

Specific places in north and central India where battle raged between the sepoys and the British were situated in a historical grid. As expressed by Rajanikanta Gupta:

1000 miles from Calcutta, surrounded by hills – is Ambala, the ancient name of which is Ambalya. The history of this place goes back to the Pandava age. In ancient India Ambala was a place of glory, as it

corresponded to Kurukshetra of epic fame, the site of eternal valour. This is also the place where Prithviraj and Samarsingha were defeated, signalling the beginning of dark days... in the ancient history of India, Ambala was well-known even at a time when Europe was savage... now, after many years, Ambala has become the site of conflict between the sepoys and the East India Company.³¹

The above description connects place and its geographical location to a history of glory and its eclipse. The lament for lost glory is expressed in a yearning to retreat through a nostalgic journey, to past triumphs. The yearning was also felt by Bengali writers who were in Delhi at the time of the Revolt. Jadunath Sarbadhikary, who toured India from 1853 to 1857, connected Delhi to its past, glorifying it as the seat of the Emperor, and memorialising it as a site of Hindu glory exemplified in the valour and prowess of Prithviraj.³² Like Rajanikanta, Jadunath reified places of combat (during 1857) through mythic/epic glory intersecting with history:

To the north-west of Kanpur, about 8 *kros* away is Bithoor. This corresponds to the forest abode of Valmiki. This is where Sita spent the years of her banishment and where Lav and Kush were born. Now... here stands a house of Baji Rao of Pune and Satara. Some soldiers occupy the place and it is the home of Nana Saheb, Baji Rao's descendant.³³

1857 was crucial in such historicisations of place and transformations of space to place, by endowing empty space with an emotive content. The history of place became an emotionally-charged ideological site of valour, leading to the memorialisation of homelands. What happened in 1857 in certain places, and local homelands were related to what had happened there earlier, connecting past instances of valour, glory and commitment to ideals of courage and independence to similar roles of present exemplars. This bonded place to the people and their past, who could then lay a claim to such valiant histories.

The land of the Marathas had long symbolised independence, courage and strength. Shivaji had shown immortal valour in battle... the people of Maharashtra, infused with the magic of his great mantra, left the imprint of their courage in every part of the country from Dakshinapatha to Aryavarta. This inspired Nana Saheb to great acts of courage, and he carried on the legacy of his lineage. To bow down before oppressors is not the mark of a courageous man. Nana Saheb did not... slide down from the high ideal of moral courage set by his forefathers. He

performed the same *birbroto* [vow/commitment of the hero] as Peshwa Baji Rao, and others before him. The valour of Nana Saheb will always be lauded by history.³⁴

Connections of people to place and to their past were further refined by emphasising an additional factor: conduct. Jadunath's travel account demonstrated how the complex interconnections of place-history, place-people, people-conduct and unity among the people of specific places were reflected in mental configurations of region-nation.

There are many Bengali *babus* of good character with marked qualities of generosity in Ambala. They generally congregate around the Kalibari [the temple of the goddess Kali]... the inhabitants of Delhi are well-spoken, of good character; they are committed to duty and to righteousness or *dharma*... Before evening, all *jatis* [including Hindus and Muslims, and people of low classes] congregate in different parts of the city.³⁵

Bengal, Ambala and Delhi were linked to each other, and interlocked with notions of *jati* and conduct that underlay a deeper sense of belonging to a wider entity. The idea that Jadunath's account was a pilgrim narrative, of the same type as the late 18th century *Tirthamangal* of Bijoyram Sen, in which there was no conception of the historical-national entity called India, is to miss the finer nuances of the work. Though different from late 19th century tracts on travel, it cannot be clubbed simplistically with the earlier pilgrim narratives. Jadunath's descriptions of pilgrim sites were linked to ideas about 'desh' (country) and the *samaj*.³⁶ It awakened a living sense of the *samajs*, local everyday life, customs and manners, conduct, histories and 'itikatha' (account of the past).³⁷ This constituted the prelude to late-nineteenth and early 20th century travel writing and historical accounts which sought to reinforce the belief in Indian nationhood rooted in history. As Dharanikanta Lahiri Choudhury put it – the best way to understand the past and present of the Indian nation was to see historical places and observe the customs of specific places in India.³⁸

Through such connections between place, people, conduct, and specifically between the people and regions of different parts of the country, Jadunath's account anticipated the idea of India, otherwise called Bharatbarsha/Hindustan. The transmutation of mythic/epic Bharat and territorial Hindustan to modern

India went through intermediate phases, and Jadunath may be said to represent a transitional genre. The quest for a history of place during and after 1857 reflected a mental transition from mythic to real India, perceived and actualised through history, myth and juxtapositions of region to country. The juxtapositions occurred in myriad ways. References to specific places (significant as sites of rebellion during 1857-58) related myth to sociological actualities in attempts to link Bengal and Bengalis to other parts of India as part of a wider samajik history. Jadunath eloquently captured this interconnection:

Kanpur is closely connected to Kanyakubja. This place is of great significance to Bengalis in past and present contexts. Six kros away from Bithoor is Kanyakubja. Here dwell the Kanauj brahmans... From Kanyakubja came five brahmans and kayasthas to Bengal. We are also among them. [We are their descendants].³⁹

1857 helped redefine and reify India and places within it through a use of the past (common historical experience), as seen in Rajanikanta, as well as through a concatenation of people, place, land, conduct and sociological interconnections reflected in Jadunath's ideas.

VI THE IDEA OF INDIA

The reification of place through history etched the conceptual outlines of India/Hindustan/Bharat. Though the idea of a historic-geographic entity called India crystallised only towards the end of the 19th century, the late 1850s witnessed its glimmerings. As mentioned, the idea of India moved through many connotative frames – mythic, historical-geographic, territorial and political (the last crystallising through the national movement of the late-19th and the 20th century). The Revolt may be seen as a turning-point in the evolution of the idea of India. This is because India was imagined through history, and 1857 was a watershed in India's history. It marked a definite stage in the conceptualisation of India variously termed as 'swadesh', 'matribhoomi', 'janmabhoomi' and Bharatbarsha. History of place was linked to the agenda of imagining India, as the fate/misfortune of specific places during the Revolt was regarded as a betrayal of the whole country. Kasiprosad Ghosh lamented

that the annexation and misfortune of Oudh symbolised a loss of the country's liberty and independence.⁴⁰

The Revolt was also contextualised with reference to the idea of an Aryan India which became a leitmotif in most Bengali texts on history from the mid-1870s. It idealised the land/country as a heroic site of valour (usually defined in Aryan terms).⁴¹ Locating the theme of Aryan India in a temporal spiral of past glory and present decline, Rajanikanta argued that glorious eras waned when the ideals of Aryan courage and dharma were eclipsed. India was situated in a dominance-subjugation historical frame of which the Revolt was an integral part. The "descendants of those who were once renowned for their courage (such as Prithviraj, Samar and Pratap Singh) came under the yoke of domination".⁴² They did not possess the Aryan qualities of courage and righteousness. With the revival of those ideals, glory would return. Shivaji had revived the golden age as he personified the Aryan ideals of courage and valour.⁴³ Significantly, such courage was also exemplified in the acts and deeds of rebel leaders during 1857-58.

Lakshmibai was the truly courageous woman of 19th century India. When India was in the grip of imperial rule from the Himalayas to Kumarika...she challenged the British, and displaying superhuman courage...fought against great adversity...At the time of the Sepoy War in 1857, when Bharatbarsha was in the throes of a major upheaval, Bundelkhand was also caught up in turmoil like Kanpur, Meerut, Lucknow and Delhi. At that time, the brave Rani Lakshmibai strove to revive her lost pride.⁴⁴

The above account apprehended the historic-geographic entity called India through Aryan ideals of moral courage and righteous conduct as exemplified in the Revolt of 1857.

1857 and its aftermath led to the expression of an embryonic nationhood through a religious idiom that connected people to swadeshi. This occurred through a twin deification of heroes and the homeland. "His countrymen (swadeshigon) regarded Shivaji as an incarnation of God (avatar). He named his sword 'Bhavani'. This sword is now in the possession of the King of Satara, and until today in the royal household at Satara, Bhavani is worshipped."⁴⁵ The ideals of independence and 'swarajya' (own realm) were personified in Bharat's/India's all-powerful goddess of endeavour and victory.⁴⁶ The deification of the country was

a fairly common theme in Bengal during the late 19th century, and occurred in different, (especially Hindu) contexts.⁴⁷ The notion of nation as mother was deeply embedded in post-Mutiny historical works and travel accounts contemporaneous to the Revolt (such as that of Jadunath Sarbadhikary, whose *Tirthabhraman* was serialised in *Janmabhoomi/Land of Birth*).

Crucially, the Revolt of 1857 helped connect earlier ideas about India (pre-1857) to India in 1857 and in the following years. In the Bengali literati's ideas about the role of 1857 in transforming ideas about India through history of place, valour, and deification, the narrative moved backward to deification of specific places such as Maharashtra (the home of a 'mahajati'/great jati) and then connected Kanpur and Satara (during the Revolt) to this historical chain. There was also an attempt to link and compare pre-1857 India to such imaginings. The accounts often swung back to Plassey, when Aryan ideals of courage, dharma and justice were trampled and insulted by the British and disregarded by the conspirators who sided with them.⁴⁸ This phase saw the defeat of the ideal Bharatbarsha of ancient times, and was also very different from India in 1857. In a sense 1857 corresponded to the ancient ideal India because the qualities of courage and dharma surfaced in the acts and deeds of the leaders. The account of a supposed "loyalist" (Rajanianata) glorifying 1857 as an exemplary phase in recreating an ideal India, is significant, and adds a new dimension to understandings of nationhood in Bengal. Two points are important. First, there was a connectivity in imaginings about India, reflected in the use and contextualisation of the term "Bharatbarsha" in bygone (days of Hindu glory), pre-Plassey and Plassey, as well as present (1857) times. Second, 1857 was a watershed not only in the recreation of a glorious India, but also in taking the country onwards toward new ideals of unity.

The multiple portrayals in terms of deification through a religious idiom, Aryan culture, history and progress that came in the wake of 1857 included, but moved beyond the concepts of mythic Bharat (the country of the sons of the King Bharat of the Mahabharata), and territorial Hindustan (which existed from the period of the Turkish Sultans through the Mughal and up to the modern period despite semantic shifts), and prioritised a higher and wider entity expressed through the descriptive

term: Bharatbarsha. In fact, the earlier senses of India as mythic Bharat and territorial Hindustan blended and fused into Bharatbarsha through a unique interlocking of history and nationhood. The linkages and connotative continuities made the ‘puranic’ Bharat and medieval Hindustan very much a part of the nationalist imaginaire.⁴⁹ Bharatbarsha was the India of the past, a heroic and historical India, and the homeland of the people. It included Hindustan, which signified north India and the different places where the mutineers fought with the British. Travel to these places helped juxtapose Bengalis to other Indians (including Hindustanis).⁵⁰ In conjunction with an urge for regional and sub-regional histories of Bengal⁵¹ seen as emblematic of a people’s past, it forged meaningful linkages between the region and the nation. The inclusive and incorporating character of samaj explained the link between regional (Bengali) and Bharatbarshiya samajs. Adherence to a “proper” code of conduct implying qualities such as truthfulness, moral courage, generosity and righteousness was the chief criteria for inclusion.⁵² These qualities were deemed to be “Aryan” and were exemplified in the acts and deeds of the rebel leaders during the Revolt. This helped construct an inclusive Bharatbarshiya universe, albeit in high Hindu/Aryan terms.

Most significantly, to the literati, Bharatbarsha was the India of the future, because it contained within it, ideas about samaj and progress. The link between samaj, nation and progress was underscored in travel accounts, historical tracts, articles in periodicals and private papers during and after the Revolt. Shambhu Chandra Mukherjee, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Bholanath Chunder – in various articles, correspondence and tracts – connected the country and the samaj to the nation, and both to the common aim of progress.⁵³

VII FACETS OF PATRIOTISM

The idea of India expressed as Bharatbarsha was based on the connection of the land and the people. But whose Bharatbarsha was being talked about/imagined? The basic issue of Indian-ness was fraught with divisions at various levels – (i) social strata/class, (ii) caste, and (iii) community. The western-educated

Bengali literati, writing travel-accounts and historical tracts during and after 1857 were keenly sensitive to how other Indians perceived them. Juxtapositions of Bengal/India and Bengalis/other Indians were shot through with the internal fragmentations mentioned above. While the Bengali literati travelling in parts of north and central India during the late 1850s could relate (at one level) to their educated/cultured counterparts from other parts of India, differences and antagonisms remained. Ordinary people of north and west India vilified and attacked Bengalis whom they regarded as agents/collaborators of the British during the Revolt. The twin facets of this otherness – the uncivilised and superstitious sepoy “traitor” and the western-educated, Anglicised Bengali babu (loyalist) found expression in many tracts.⁵⁴ The crucial point here is how such divisions and fragmentations influenced the imagining of self-other relations. How far was 1857 an ideological rallying-point for reconsidering unities despite fragmentations? What were the contexts of assimilation? In other words, was it possible to move from fragments to an overarching Indian samaj (idea of nationhood)? The present section problematises the issue of patriotism in Bengal with reference to Hindu-Muslim unity/difference. In this connection I also compare the Bengali formulations of patriotism and representations of unity to the “mentality of the mutiny” in an all-India sense. Rajat Kanta Ray has argued that two main factors united the Hindus and Muslims during the Revolt: their opposition to the alien kafirs (British) and their attachment to the country. They wished to bring back the old social order based on difference, but mutual coexistence of the two communities. This forged the inchoate social nationality: “the Hindus and Musalmans of Hindustan”, overlaid by the Weltanschauung of religion.⁵⁵

The idea was echoed in specific ways in the Bengali literati’s works relating to the Revolt. Rajanikanta Gupta noted the degree of unity between Hindus and Muslims and considered the two communities to be an integral part of Bharatbarsha. The two factors mentioned by Ray – opposition to the British and attachment to the country underlay Rajanikanta’s ideas too: “From April 1857 the Governor General understood that those very Indians who had once helped the British to strengthen themselves...had turned against them. The Hindus and

Musalmans of Bharatbarsha were united in their endeavour to harm the British.”⁵⁶ What is significant is that Rajanikanta used the term “Bharatbarsha” instead of “Hindustan” in describing the attachment of the united group “Hindus and Musalmans” to the country. This added a new dimension to the idea of nationhood, which was further strengthened by linking the history of place, jati and dharma to the issue of Hindu-Muslim unity: “Ambala was the place of unity...of Hindus and Muslims...who dreamed of equality...it became a site of war where the pride of jati and the purity of dharma were trampled.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Delhi was regarded as a historical site where the pride and self-respect of Hindus and Muslims had been once celebrated.⁵⁸

Even conservative writers such as Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, deeply rooted in an Aryan/Hindu inherited tradition, emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity. Despite being separate units for so long, after Dalhousie’s annexations, the “Bharatbarshiya” Hindus and Muslims rose in Revolt.⁵⁹ This account, like Rajanikanta’s, forged the social collectivity: Hindus and Muslims of Bharatbarsha. Other works which regarded the Revolt as a mere sepoy mutiny also admitted the unity of Hindus and Muslims.⁶⁰

Such assertions of Hindu-Muslim unity in accounts of the Revolt anticipated certain aspects of a slightly later (1880s and 1890s) and wider discourse on a joint Indo-Islamic historical legacy. Although the leitmotif of an Aryan-Hindu India led to a general denigration of Muslim culture and history reflected in familiar clichés of “Muslim misrule”/“medieval tyranny”, some voices stressed plurality, and sought to incorporate Muslims on Hindu terms. The flexibility of “culturally Aryan” afforded scope for including others (including Muslims) who adhered to a “proper” code of conduct,⁶¹ muting the polarity of “Hindu” and “non-Hindu” in a discourse that was in continual flux. Akshoykumar Moitreya underlined a joint Indo-Islamic historical legacy of pre-colonial Bengal⁶² when Hindus and Muslims formed a common ruling elite. These perspectives were reflected in, and contextualised with reference to ideas about Hindu-Muslim unity during the Revolt of 1857. Rajanikanta recounted how Hindu-Muslim cooperation during the Mughal period had signified a common glory. The eclipse of this glory

by the rise of the British and their victories during the Revolt had spelt doom for both communities:

During the Mughal period, Hindus and Muslims were engaged alike in political and military duties. The Hindus gave good advice to the Mughals in political matters, and were chieftains of Mughal-occupied provinces. Their power and pride were based on their sense of duty, devotion to values and good conduct... [Now] their sons realised that the power and precedence were declining because of the un-generous laws and practices of the British. It was an eclipse of glory, a glory remembered alike by the Hindu senapatis, rajasva mantris and subahdars [officials] as by the Muslims. The Mughal palace at Delhi...once the site and symbol of that common glory...was bereft.⁶³

Such portrayals do not fit the mould of Muslim tyranny/misrule. The events of 1857 helped recast and occasionally even break such stereotypes.⁶⁴ However, the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity during the Revolt (underlying the “mentality of the mutiny” in an all-India sense) was subtly transmuted in the Bengali literati’s discourse. While unity was highlighted (as seen above) in certain contexts, there were limitations in Bengali conceptualisations of an all-India patriotism based on Hindu-Muslim unity. An on-the-spot autobiographical account, *Bidrohe Bangali* pointed out that Hindus and the ordinary people of Rohilkhand were not elated at the re-establishment of the Nawab’s (Muslim) rule.⁶⁵ In fiction too, the stereotypes of the “good” Hindu and the “bad” Muslim persisted.⁶⁶ It is important to note that such portrayals were characteristic of overtly loyalist accounts. Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, the author of *Bidrohe Bangali* actually fought on the British side against the sepoys, and *Chittabinodini*, the anti-Muslim fictional work was markedly loyalist in tone. Such viewpoints expressed convictions of the beneficence of British rule, viewing a “tyrannical” medieval as a dark foil offsetting modernity.

From the 1870s various works equated “Aryan” with “Hindu”, and linked Bengalis to a heroic Aryan identity.⁶⁷ However, all works glorifying Aryanism did not exclude and denigrate (in all contexts) the Muslim “other”. As mentioned earlier, cultural Aryanism, linked to the inclusive concept of samaj left room for assimilation. What is significant is that the same individual could stress both Aryan glory and Hindu-Muslim unity in different contexts. Rajanikanta, who glorified Aryan achievements in

Arya Kirti (1896) highlighted Hindu-Muslim unity in the context of the Revolt of 1857. The inclusive theme was definitely a major trajectory in conceptualisations of patriotism in Bengal during and after 1857. Just as in north India, the idea of the ‘qaum’ was applied in the context of Hindus too,⁶⁸ in Bengal samaj was deployed as an inclusive conceptual category that could contextually include “others” including Muslims.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual conjunction of the themes explored in this article illuminates hitherto understated aspects of the Bengali literati’s ideas about nationhood as they came to be developed around 1857. It has drawn on contemporaneous on-the spot accounts, but more on the tracts and articles (related to 1857) which proliferated within about 17 years of the Revolt, and assessed how the changing socio-cultural milieu and historical circumstances shaped the ideological contours of the discourse. The latter represents one trajectory of response, and does not imply the denial of other discourses. It portrays the ideas of one section of the Bengali society: the western-educated, mainly high-caste, professional literati. Within this social segment too, there were internal variations, but this essay has tried to map areas of consensus and ideological rendezvous despite internal shifts.

The uniqueness of the Bengali (regional) representation of an iconic “national” event lay in the situation of 1857 within a wider discourse on nationhood by deploying the conceptual category of samaj. The specific ways in which 1857 figured in the Bengali nationalist imaginaire flowed from samaj, which implied both being and becoming a nation, and related past, indigenous to modern (19th century) unities. As inheritances were important to such grounding of nationhood, the location of 1857 in history was crucial. The elements of nationhood embedded in the (all-India) “mentality of the mutiny” were subtly transmuted. The urge for progress emphasised the inculcation of a “proper” code of conduct and self-improvement, which found expression in cultural nationalism and the agenda of ‘jatipratishtha’. Thus the national element in the literati’s discourse was couched in a samajik and not a religious rhetoric. The theme of social

progress drew on a history of the social collectivity which reconfigured place and the country. The utopic and inclusive space of the continually incorporating samaj moved beyond "Hindustan" toward "Bharatbarsha" thus transcending and marginalising the localised nature of the Revolt. Though there were inherent limitations (such as contextual dilution of the all-India Hindu-Muslim unity) in such conceptualisations, the discourse has left legacies for contemporary representations of 1857 as a symbol and well-spring of nationhood.

NOTES

- 1 The standard colonial representation of the Revolt as a sepoy mutiny was echoed by Indian historians such as R C Majumdar and S N Sen. See Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Calcutta, 1957; second edition, Calcutta, Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, 1963; and Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, New Delhi, the Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1957. S B Chaudhuri analysed the nature of the civil rebellion in *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-58*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1957. Eric Stokes has argued that the rural Revolt in 1857 had an elitist character. See Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986. According to Gautam Bhadra, all these viewpoints operated within an elitist paradigm, and did not capture the voice of the ordinary rebel. See Gautam Bhadra, 'Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven' in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies*, Volume IV, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, pp 229-75.
- 2 Shahid Amin, 'Of Many Pasts', *The Telegraph*, July 13, 2006.
- 3 Eric Stokes, 'Traditional Resistance Movements and Afro-Asian Nationalism: The Context of the 1857 Mutiny Rebellion in India', *Past and Present*, Oxford University Press, No 48, August 1970, p 100.
- 4 See Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1959.
- 5 Ainslee Embree, *1857 in India: Mutiny or War of Independence*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1963, pp 43-44.
- 6 Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003, p 355.
- 7 Ray, *The Felt Community*, pp 355-57.
- 8 Embree, *1857 in India*, pp 59-61.
- 9 Nandalal Chatterjee, quoted in Embree, *1857 in India*, pp 62-63.
- 10 The Bengali literati encompassed a multilayered social group broadly signifying the middle class (madhyabitta). It intersected with categories such as "elite" and 'bhadrakalok'. See John Mc Guire, *The Making of the Colonial Mind*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1983, pp 2, 20, and S N Mukherjee, 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta' in

S N Mukherjee and E Leach (eds), *Elites in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p 34.

- 11 Etymologically meaning to move together in a united manner, samaj could variously mean aggregate, union of castes and people of different regions. For details about how the Bengali literati deployed the conceptual category of samaj to forge connections between the modern nation and the historical community, see Swarupa Gupta, 'Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, 1867-1905', *Modern Asian Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Vol 40, No 2, May 2006, pp 273-302.
- 12 *The Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette*, Wednesday, May 6, 1857. Rare Book, National Library, Calcutta, emphasis mine.
- 13 Judith Brown, 1994: 90, quoted in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 2004, p 176.
- 14 See E I Brodkin, 'The Struggle for Succession: Rebels and Loyalists in the Indian Mutiny of 1857', *Modern Asian Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Vol 6, No 3, 1972, p 277.
- 15 Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, p 177.
- 16 *Hindoo Patriot*, also mentioned by S B Chaudhuri, quoted in *ibid*, p 177.
- 17 Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, *Bidrohe Bangali ba Amar Jibancharit*, printed in *Janmabhoomi*, 1889-1891, p 171. Also see Harimohan Moitra, *Bharat Itihas*, 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1874, p 43.
- 18 Dakshinaranjan Mookherjee was portrayed as "loyalist" and 'intriguer' / "schemer". See Thomas Edwards, *Biography of Derozio*, quoted in Sukumar Mitra, *Atharasha Satanna O Bangla Desh*, Calcutta, 1960, pp 15-16, 32. Attitudinal change was also reflected in Kaliprasanna Sinha. In *Malatimadhava* he praised Queen Victoria and disparaged the sepoys. In a later work, *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, Calcutta, 1862, he criticised and ridiculed the fear and alarm of the British during the Revolt.
- 19 'The Town Hall Meeting', *Brahmo Public Opinion*, Vol 1, No 6, Thursday, April 24, Calcutta, 1878, p 13. National Library Annex, Calcutta.
- 20 *Brahmo Public Opinion*, Vol 1, No 7, Thursday, May 2, Calcutta, 1878, p 55.
- 21 In fiction, such moves toward redefinition of identity took an extreme form. In the dream-arena of literature, the independence of swadesh could be achieved even through armed rebellion. In some late-colonial novels, drama and short stories, Bengalis actually helped rebel leaders during the Revolt of 1857. See Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Chandra*, Calcutta, 1884 and Upendra Chandra Mitra, *Bharater Sukhasapna ba Nana Saheb*, Calcutta, 1879.
- 22 Shibnath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj*, Calcutta, 1904, reprinted 1957, p 202.
- 23 Ajitkumar Chakrabarty, *Maharshi Debendranath Tagore*, Volume II, Calcutta, undated, p 270. This has been mentioned in Sukumar Mitra, *Atharasha Satanna*, p 11.
- 24 The definition of the nation as a cultural entity involves a shift from Saidian perspectives that see the nation through a political prism, subject to the overwhelming sway of the state. For details see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories in The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p 112.
- 25 W W Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, London, 1897, p 87.

- 26 Nationhood is seen here in terms of rooted-ness in past societies, customs, struggles and common experiences of the people, not as a modern/political artefact.
- 27 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Shipahi Juddher Itihas*, Part II, Calcutta, 1877, 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1885, pp 105-06.
- 28 Ibid, p 141.
- 29 Harishchandra Mukherjee's comment printed in the *Hindoo Patriot*, May 6, 1858.
- 30 *Hindoo Patriot*, December 30, 1858, Rare Book, National Library, Calcutta.
- 31 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Shipahi Juddher Itihas*, Volume I, Part 2, pp 54-55.
- 32 Jadunath Sarbadhikary, *Tirthabhraman* (1853-1857), Nagendranath Basu (ed), Calcutta, 1915, pp 292, 381.
- 33 Ibid, p 49.
- 34 Ibid, p 79.
- 35 Ibid, pp 364, 369, 371.
- 36 Ibid, Introduction, p 2.
- 37 Ibid, Introduction, pp 2-3. While Kumkum Chatterjee has argued that the distinction between travel-as-pilgrimage and travel-as-nationalism was blurred in the late 19th and early 20th century travel writing, I have attempted to show that this overlap was present in earlier works too, such as Sarbadhikary's *Tirthabhraman*. See Chatterjee, 'Discovering India' in Daud Ali (ed), *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, pp 204-05.
- 38 See Dharanikanta Lahiri Choudhury, *Bharat Bhraman*, Calcutta, 1910, p 2, mentioned in ibid, p 203.
- 39 This is how the Adisur legend about the origin of Bengali society was linked to a history of place during 1857-58. See Sarbadhikary, *Tirthabhraman*, p 51.
- 40 Kasiprosad Ghosh, *Mukherjee's Magazine*, Volume I, 1872, National Library Annex, Calcutta.
- 41 Situating the Revolt of 1857 in a wider discourse of an Aryan India was even more pronounced in Bengali literature of various genres (fiction) from the mid-1870s. See, for instance, Gobinda Chandra Ghosh, *Chittobinodini*; and Mitra, *Bharater Sukhasapna*.
- 42 Ibid, p 46. See also Rajanikanta's other work, *Bharatprasanga*, Calcutta, 1880, reprinted 1887, pp 1-8.
- 43 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Birmahima*, Calcutta, 1885, pp 45-46.
- 44 Ibid, pp 25-31. Though the portrayal of rebel leaders such as the Rani of Jhansi or Nana Saheb did not follow a uniform pattern, the trajectory of valorisation became dominant from the late 19th century and helped shape notions of an Aryan India. See Chandicharan Sen, *Jhansir Rani*, 1888 and Mitra, *Nana Saheb*.
- 45 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Birmahima*, p 71.
- 46 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Bharatprasanga*, p 15.
- 47 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Anandamath*, Calcutta, 1881.
- 48 Rajanikanta Gupta, *Bharatprasanga*, pp 38-41.
- 49 The idea of a 'puranic' geography and the continuity of myth in imagining India were present in a number of tracts. See Nagendranath Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihas*, Calcutta, 1900.

- 50 Such juxtapositions are reflected in the use and acceptance of the terms 'Young Bengal' vis-a-vis 'Young Hindustani'. See Bholanath Chunder, *Travels of a Hindoo*, London, 1869, Vol 1, pp 388-99; Vol 2, pp 392-94, mentioned by Chatterjee, 'Discovering India', p 214.
- 51 The urge for regional and sub-regional histories of Bengal was noted in an article, 'Itihas Sangraha' in *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, No 229, Bhadra, 1862, printed in Benoy Ghosh, *Shamoyikpatre Sekaler Samajchitra*, Calcutta, 1963, p 209.
- 52 The literati connected these criteria to cultural Aryanism implying adherence to the epics and the puranas, linguistic connections with Sanskrit and belief in a supreme Godhead. See Rajnarain Basu, *Bridhha Hindur Asha*, Calcutta, 1881, and *Atmacharit*, Calcutta, 1908, p 96. This has been mentioned in Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'Colonialism and Cultural Identity: The Making of a Hindu Discourse', unpublished PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1993, pp 43-45.
- 53 See Bholanath Chunder's articles in *Mukherjee's Magazine* from 1873 onwards. Also relevant are Shambhuchandra's correspondence with Bholanath Chunder (e.g. letter written on April 9, 1873) and Bankimchandra's views as expressed to Shambhuchandra Mukherjee. See Sukumar Mitra, *Atharasha Satanna*, p 118. For linkages between 'Bharatbarsha' and history, samaj and progress, see Rabindranath Tagore, *Bharatbarshiya Samaj, Bangadarshan*, Sraban, 1901.
- 54 Bholanath Chunder, *Travels of a Hindoo*, Vol 1, pp 289, 344 (Bengalis regarded as foreigners); Baradakanta Sengupta, *Bharat Bhraman* Part 2, Calcutta, undated, pp 15-16, 106-07; Prasannamoyee Devi, *Aryavarta: Janaika Bangamahilar Bhraman Brittanta*, Calcutta, 1889, p 20 (Bengalis regarded as Christians). These portrayals have been mentioned by Kumkum Chatterjee. See Chatterjee, 'Discovering India', p 219. For details relating to the plight of probasi (non-resident) Bengalis in north India, and their humiliation (those who supported the British were given the derogatory epithet of 'Khoyer Khan'), see Duragadas Bandyopadhyay, *Bidrohe Bangali*, and Sarbadhikary, *Tirthabhraman*, p 474.
- 55 Ray, *The Felt Community*, pp 380-82.
- 56 Gupta, *Shipahi Juddher Itihas*, p 65.
- 57 Ibid, pp 54-57.
- 58 Ibid, p 143.
- 59 Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, *Shipahi Bidroher Itihas* (2 vols), quoted in Sukumar Mitra, *Atharasha Satanna*, pp 99, 105.
- 60 Upendranath Mukhopadhyay, commenting on Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay's *Shipahi Bidroho ba Mutiny*, Calcutta, 1907, noted that in the Revolt, both the communities joined against the British. See Sukumar Mitra, *Atharasha Satanna*, pp 93-94.
- 61 Examples of cultural inclusions albeit in certain specific contexts are to be found in Rajnarain Basu, *Hindu Dharmer Sreshthattva* and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, *Saphal Sapna, Bhudeb Rachana Sambhar*, Calcutta, 1957, p 268; and *Pushpanjali*, Calcutta, 1876.
- 62 Akhoykumar Moitraya, *Gourer Katha*, Calcutta, 1899-1900, reprinted 1985, p 39; and *Sirajuddaula*, Calcutta, 1895.

63 Gupta, *Shipahi Juddher Itihas*, pp 142-43, 235.

64 An article in *Arya Darshan* countered the myth of 'Muslim misrule' in Ayodhya and questioned the beneficial effect of the establishment of British power in Ayodhya after the sepoy mutiny. 'Bharatiya Itihas', *Arya Darshan*, Calcutta, 1876, p 384.

65 Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, *Bidrohe Bangali*, pp 173-75.

66 Gobinda Chandra Ghosh, *Chittabinodini*, p 37.

67 See Nandamohan Chattopadhyay, *Adhunatana Samaj*, Calcutta, 1877 and Nilmoni Mukhopadhyay, *Bharatbarsher Itihas*, Calcutta 1872.

68 Rajat Ray has pointed out that in the common parlance of the period of the Revolt, the Muslims were a qaum (people/race/community/nation), and in their eyes the Hindus were too. See Ray, *The Felt Community*, p 383. The interplay between the conceptual categories of qaum and samaj brings to light an interesting difference: while qaum signified separateness/difference of the Hindus and Muslims, samaj was a more inclusive rubric that could weld diverse groups and forge unity within the interstices of clan, caste, community and micro-region.

Mangal Pandey: Film and History

Rochona Majumdar, Dipesh Chakrabarty

WE begin with an acknowledgement: that what happened in British India in 1857 cannot be comprehensively covered by any one particular name usually given to it – the Mutiny, the First War of Independence, a people's war, a peasant uprising, and so on. There were no doubt particular elements in the events that partially justify such attempts at classification but we believe that, taken as a whole, what happened was no one thing. So after the fashion of calling the events of September 11, 2001, simply "9/11", we will call the events of 1857, "1857". Precisely because 1857 was no one specific event and had its impact on many different scales, it has been recalled on several different registers ever since its occurrence: as memoirs, as traveller's experience, as history, as fiction, as photographs, paintings and sketches, and as films. Ketan Mehta's film *Mangal Pandey* (2005, with Aamir Khan as Pandey) was one such recent filmic reconstruction of the early events of 1857: the rebellion of a lone soldier, Mangal Pandey, of the 34th regiment of the Native Infantry of the East India Company's army.

Our point of departure is the fact that the film *Mangal Pandey* (hereafter *MP*) gave rise to a lively debate in the Indian press about historical films and their relationship to actual histories (as historians might write them). This general point about filmic rendition of the past and its relation to the past itself – the past that historians try to recover – is something that interests us in this essay. But there is also a second point of interest. *MP* was something of an exception in stirring up such a controversy about history (for more details on the controversy, see below). *MP*, for instance, was not the first filmic representation of 1857. Two other films that readily come to mind, if we excluded Sohrab Merwanji Modi's 1953 *Jhansi ki Rani*, are *Junoon* (1978,

directed by Shyam Benegal) based on Ruskin Bond's "A Flight of Pigeons" and *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (1977, directed by Satyajit Ray). Both these films were set against the stormy backdrop of the political turmoil of 1857. Yet, neither raised the hackles of intellectuals, politicians, film critics, and journalists in the way that *MP* did.

Indeed, as Priya Jaikumar has pointed out in her recent work on films in colonial India, historicals as a genre have had a long life in Indian cinema. From the colonial period on, Indian films in the historical genre depicted imaginary pasts, while mythologicals incorporated stories from the epics and puranas or constructed fables to narrate allegorical tales about Indian society. But the lack of realism that characterised either genre is read by Jaikumar as serving a direct political, i.e., nationalist or anti-colonial purpose during colonial rule. As she argues, "Almost in direct defiance (of the state) Indian historicals repeatedly enacted a crisis of authority in governance. Historicals were different from socials in their placement of a film's dramatic action in antiquity; they literally erased the presence of foreign colonisers by transposing visions of a future nation onto a fantasised past."¹ Not that the colonial government was duped by this aesthetic sleight of hand. To cite Jaikumar once again, "The state gauged sedition based on assessment of intent; novels and films were of interest to the state for their submerged meanings and for their intentional as well as unintentional effects."² Despite their departure from tropes of classical realism – which in the context of Indian cinema is the aesthetic counterpart of the political project of nation building – the colonial-Indian historical film can be interpreted as a text that locates the "harsh and strange spots of the past" in an even more distant or imaginary past if only to allow the viewer to "conceive good wishes for the future".³

Jaikumar's conclusion about the historical in the age of Empire has a direct bearing on what we argue in the forthcoming pages and is therefore worth dwelling upon at some length. Colonial cinema's realisation of an ideal future society, she argues, "is contingent on an Antigone-like rejection of (the potentially authoritarian, unreliable, or corrupt) contemporary state/community. The colonial historical most closely fulfils a people's romance with the notion of a future Indian nation,

imagined as a predestined tryst with one's unrealised but innate, antique potential for righteous self governance."⁴

It seems to us, however, that with the attainment of independence, historical films lost this political function. They became the stuff of mythic lore, stories inserted into the past with no basis in either fact or politics. Hence Sharmistha Gooptu's observation that the 1960 historical drama *Mughal-e-Azam* which was only "loosely" historical hardly ever attracted the kind of moral and political attention that got focused on *MP*.⁵ Films such as the more recent *Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi), *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996, directed by Shyam Benegal), *Sardar* (1993, also directed by Ketan Mehta) have all modelled themselves on historical research. But few were roused about the historicity of these films, or their supposed impact on the audience. Yet, with *MP*, all kinds of anxieties, concerns, and strong sentiments were expressed in the press. Thus, to only give two examples, a commentator in *The Hindu* complained:

Bollywood continues to defile history. Now distorting, now disparaging, Bollywood's arthritic treatment of the past goes on. Ketan Mehta's much panned "Mangal Pandey" is only the latest ... In the garb of artistic licence truth is short-changed, and only an honest cinemagoer with a heart for history duped.⁶

And a comment online read:

Aamir Khan is a rabble-rouser. It's a role he has mastered to perfection. His nostrils flare up, eye sockets pop and righteous indignation spills across the screen. It's no surprise, then, that it is this Angry Khan plastered on all posters for *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*. Luckily for him, as well as his audience, the rabble-rousing works. He did it in *Lagaan*. He does it again here. Only this time around, he's better dressed for the occasion.⁷

Among the many talking points against the film were the following: the film was a travesty of "history", it was a melodramatic spectacle that cost a staggering 500 crores part of which came from the UK Film Council, but later vilified the British, that it peddled myths and jingoism as history. And perhaps most damning of all from the standpoint of the film industry was that there was no consensus on whether or not, like *Lagaan*, *MP* could be considered a box office success.

It was not that the criticism was always unfair or untrue. In any case, we do not seek to decide that question. We are attempting

to put forward some speculative and tentative thoughts on why, unlike other historicals in the post-independence period, *MP* gave rise to such concerned – and concerted – criticism. If we bracket for the moment the question of commercial gains – something that is at the heart of any Bollywood enterprise and something that can easily give rise to moral positions – we will proceed to suggest that the concerns about historical accuracy that were expressed about and around *MP* may be read as belonging to a tradition of debates what might constitute, properly, “a politics of the people” in democracies in the age of mass-media and mass-politics. Some aspects of this debate are global, as we shall see, but certain twists are specifically Indian.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE FILM

MP opens with a song sequence. The picturisation is as follows. There is first a dissolving shot of a painting that gives way to the sun rising against the horizon of a river, presumably the Ganges. As titles roll we witness a group of men on an elephant addressing themselves to entire villages, early bathers on the river ghats, people congregated at bazaars and under trees, munshis, sepoys, traders, urging them all to rise. Their journey ends outside what appears to be a jail or barrack and we are introduced to one of the main players of the film – the English East India Company. The “rising” invoked in the song is also brought into perspective as we witness red coated British soldiers marching in an orderly file into the barracks escorting with them a person who is shown from the ground up. His feet are heavily shackled, he is chained and handcuffed. As the camera moves up his body we see his thickly bandaged torso under which his sacred thread is displayed quite prominently. We know at this point that the long haired, light skinned prisoner is one of the twice-born.

As we wait for a frontal shot of the prisoner we are told more about the Company. That it was one of the most powerful political and commercial enterprises of the 19th century and by 1857 it controlled 20 per cent of the world’s population. The Company, the voiceover tells us, had its own laws, government, and army. Once the opposition is clearly identified, the camera rolls back to the prisoner who is now being mounted on the

gallows. Standing on one side is an orderly group of British soldiers, one of whom has discomfiture and pathos written on his face. As viewers we do not know at this point that the narrative of the film will be based on the remembrance of this lone Indophilic Englishman who is later introduced as Captain Gordon. But the bruise on his cheek and his overt embarrassment at the sight of the prisoner tells us that within the East India Company are whites who feel ill-fitted to the Company's outfit. Finally we get a frontal shot of Mangal Pandey. But our first glimpse of him happens through a noose that is about to go around his neck. This shot of Pandey's face framed by the noose returns us again to the theme of the opening song whose refrain 'mangala mangala' foretells an event that will be auspicious for all. It is almost as if the noose in this case is a garland that is put around the neck of a deity that brings all round 'kushal mangal' (good luck) – an expression occurring in the song – to worshippers and those beholding the deity. The tightening of the noose around Mangal Pandey's neck will bring a similar auspiciousness to the country where he was born. When asked by the presiding British officer whether he has a last wish, Mangal Pandey declares that it is beyond the officer's powers to grant him his last wishes. But that he is certain that those wishes would one day be fulfilled.

The hanging cannot be carried out on that day, April 7, 1857, as the hangman who was supposed to carry out the task had deserted his duty. As the Company sends out for a new hangman we enter the film's narrative through a flashback by Captain Gordon. The central axis around which the film revolves is the friendship between Mangal Pandey and Gordon. The latter is constantly separated out from the rest of his fellow officers. While he is superior in rank to Pandey, he is a man of humble origins from Glasgow, a papist among his protestant brethren. He is also more avowedly Indian than he is English having lived and worked in India and eventually is shown having a relationship with a Hindu widow, Jwala. It is Gordon who in response to a query from Mangal Pandey tells us about the Company. Answering Pandey's repeated questions about "who is the Company?", "what is this object called the Company?" Gordon states that the Company is a strange creature ('ajeeb hasti'). It has a single motto, profit. This it manages through trade – trade in

indigo, opium, spices, love, honour, anything and everything in the world. He likens the company to the "villain" in the Indian epic Ramayana. But if Ravana had ten heads, the Company has a thousand which are glued together by one overriding drive – "greed." On a previous occasion, at a party in the house of his senior officer Gordon tells Emily Kent, the host's daughter that the Company forces Indian peasants to cultivate poppy from which opium is produced. This is then exported to China in exchange for silks and tea thereby producing an entire nation of opium eaters. When the Chinese emperor resists the Company, the latter dispatches its Indian sepoys to fight and die for the Company's cause. "The circle is complete" declares Gordon and "we call it the free market". Not only Gordon, throughout the first half of the film there are repeated critiques of Company rule. For example, a villager declares to his cronies 'Jab saudagar ho raja, tab praja ke baaje baaja' (When the trader becomes ruler, the subjects face the music). Crown rule however is held up as more just, benign, and fair. Lord Canning is shown as holding up a toast to the queen and to British rule which he states majestically is epitomised by modern governance, scientific rationality, and the rule of law. The Company however is a mockery of each of these ideals. So much so, that one Lockwood has been sent over from Britain to investigate the misdemeanors of the Company's financial affairs.

All this is reminiscent of what Nicholas Dirks has felicitously phrased "the scandal of Empire". For Dirks, the empire was scandalous not only in terms of the private loot carried on by Company officials, but also in its misuse and abuse "of other grants, treaties, agreements, and understandings, each of which ...became the pretext for the assumption of sovereign rights over trade, revenue, law and land on the part of a monopoly joint stock company that was at the same time systematically violating the terms of its own relationship to the Crown and Parliament of England."⁸ Yet, within the narrative structure of the film Mangal Pandey's anti-Company actions are not fuelled by any of these miscarriages of justice. In fact he is amenable, albeit with great mental agony and anxiety, to countenance a fellow Indian servant being abused by one Captain Hewson as a "black dog" and beaten up mercilessly. He even shoots upon hapless villagers who produced opium at the Company's behest. He shares his

frustrations with Gordon, his friend and trusted superior. Perhaps the strength of the friendship gives him the wherewithal to carry on in the employment of the Company. It is not until he is convinced of the truth in the rumours about the use of cow and pig fat in the cartridges meant for use in the newly introduced Enfield rifles that Pandey turns rebellious.

If the first half of the film revolves around the friendship between Pandey and Gordon, the second half depicts its unravelling. It was Gordon's assurance that the Company was cognisant of the sepoy's religious beliefs that persuaded Pandey to bite off the greased cartridge. But, gradually the rumours that the cartridges were greased with substances considered profane by both Hindus and Muslims gather steam until Pandey and his other sepoy cohort pay a visit to the cartridge factory run by a Parsi businessman. In a scene bordering on the absurd we see bubbles of cow and pig fat bubbling in large cauldrons and animal carcasses strewn and hung all around the inside of the factory. Pandey stumbles out disgusted and disillusioned. His greatest concern at this point however is that he has lost his high caste status and has become an untouchable like Nainsukh. The first half of the film had several sequences where Pandey is shown spurning Nainsukh for defiling him with his touch following Pandey's purificatory early morning bathing ritual in the Ganges. But once he is assured by the other sepoys that an act committed in ignorance is not debilitating to one's caste status Pandey galvanises into action.

He pays a late night visit to Gordon returning to him a pistol that had been a gift from the Englishman to Pandey when he saved his life in the Afghan war. Having severed the knot with Gordon, Pandey begins to plan rebellion and the overthrow of the Company raj. In this his close collaborator is one subahdar Zafar Khan, a Muslim official in the Company's army. The film explicitly invokes Hindu-Muslim solidarity in the rising against the British. The use of a Sufi song, Hindus showing respect for Muslim religious practices and visiting Sufi shrines creates images of a syncretic and secular culture. It is also at this point that the film raises the most interesting questions about the nature of sovereignty under colonialism. As Pandey and his colleagues meet up with Afzal Khan (modelled on Azimullah Khan?), a representative of Nana Sahib and Tatya Tope, the

latter solicit the sepoys' support in their crusade against the East India Company. Pandey's retort to them is significant. He accuses the maharajas and other princely scions of having relinquished their kingdoms to the Company without any significant resistance. He charges them of being slothful and wedded to a life of luxury and splendour. As a member of the Company's army, he has witnessed the infighting and lack of initiative among the maharajas. Thus there was no way that he would exchange one set of corrupt rulers, the East India company for another, the kings and princes of Hindustan. When asked who would replace the Company's rule his one word response is "the people". He elaborates his point with words and sentiments that would have been anachronistic in the context of the mid-19th century. "We are Hindustan", says Pandey. "The Company rules on our strength". Just as iron alone can "cut iron", it is only the Company's army that can effectively challenge the Company. Returning once again to the theme of popular sovereignty he asserts that "In England too only the coins bear the queen's insignia. It is the people who rule". The battle to come was a battle for freedom. It was to be a battle that would ensure "the freedom of the past for the freedom of the future". In this war of freedom the one symbol that would hold together the rebel army, the princes, and all would be the Red Fort in Delhi and its elderly occupant Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor.

From here on the film proceeds rapidly to its climax. The sepoys' plot of declaring war on May 31 is foiled as the Company sends out for the queen's regiment from Rangoon to combat the rebels before that date. Caught unawares and unprepared a few days before their planned uprising, Pandey nonetheless fights almost single-handed with the English. But here too the focal point of the dramatic action is a duel between him and Captain Gordon where Pandey clearly emerges as the victor but spares Gordon his life. Seeing that he is about to be captured by the British he puts his chest on gun point and pulls the trigger. The British however want him alive so as to mete out exemplary punishment that would deter future rebellion. When Gordon tries to persuade a hospitalised Pandey that a guilty plea and apology might save his life Pandey refuses. Once again we hear sentiments whose intellectual provenance would belong

somewhere in the early 20th century but in the film are put in the mouth of an illiterate subaltern in the East India Company's army. He tells Gordon that for the longest time, he (Pandey) had treated Nainsukh as an untouchable. Now however it is clear to him that they (implying the colonised) were all untouchables without the right to raise their heads in their own land. His fight was no longer against the "grease" or against the cartridges. He was prepared to bite off a thousand cartridges if only that would win him his freedom. His last lines quite literally (for he does not speak to his lady love Heera who comes to meet him before the hanging) are spoken to his friend Gordon. "Hindustan is rising and no one can stop it – not you, not me, not my life."

The flashback ends here. We are returned to the opening song of the film 'mangala mangala' and to the re-scheduled hanging. Except this time around the punishment will take place in the open with a surging crowd of spectators who have to be reined in by Company soldiers. Mangal Pandey escorted by the English soldiers appears on screen. Unlike in the opening scene this time he emerges head first, almost as if he is rising from the ashes. Indeed he is a new man. Gone are his allegiances as a paid Company sepoy, his pride as a brahmin, as a man who used to loathe prostitutes. He emerges as the first future citizen who is martyring himself for his country. The slow emergence of this figure – head first with a prominent red tilak on his forehead, followed by his muscular arms bound to a bamboo pole, his legs in chains all seem to signal the emergence of an unmarked citizen subject who is martyring himself for his country. The significance of his still wearing the sacred thread seems to have been negated by his earlier statements about untouchability. As he is marched to the gallows his eyes stare straight ahead. The only person he casts a sidelong glance at is Gordon. The next few scenes unfold swiftly. Pandey shouts his last words "Halla Bol" exhorting the massive crowd to rise in rebellion. His body, shown from a distance whooshes up, and a deathly silence descends upon the crowd. After this momentary lull, it is Nainsukh the untouchable who follows Pandey's cry, yells "Halla Bol" and breaks through the barricade of British soldiers. The mutiny has begun. The crowd that had gathered to view the spectacle of Pandey's death rushes forth on the field in a manner reminiscent of the exultant crowd of villagers after the cricket

victory in *Lagaan*. The voiceover is resumed one last time as we are informed that this was one of the “bloodiest battles in human history”. It put an end to the Company’s Raj in India and led to the Queen’s proclamation in 1858.

Historical records have apparently noted that an English officer named Gordon fought on the side of the sepoys. While the British termed this event the “mutiny”, Om Puri’s baritone tells us for Indians it has remained the “first war of independence” and Mangal Pandey is one of the first martyrs of that war. There is a rapid succession of portraits. First it is Queen Victoria, whose face dissolves into Mangal Pandey’s whose face in turn dissolves into found footage showing Gandhi and familiar scenes reminiscent of Gandhian civil disobedience. Pandey’s dream we are informed was realised in 1947 when Nehru is shown hoisting the Indian national flag.

TRAVESTY OF HISTORY?

Very little indeed is known about the historical person Mangal Pandey, a member of No 5 Company of the 34th Native Infantry at Barrackpore, who “mutinied” some time late in the afternoon of March 29, 1857.⁹ His presence in the actual history of 1857 seems to have been shadowy. On the one hand, there is the claim that “his actions precipitated the mutiny/rebellion of 1857”.¹⁰ But it is at the very least uncertain whether Pandey’s individual act of mutiny can be said to have precipitated 1857, for the grievances over greased cartridges had been festering for some time.¹¹ Some of the histories of 1857 published in the years immediately following the events do not – even when they mention the Mangal Pandey episode – cast him in the role of a catalyst. William Howard Russell, “the first war correspondent” who wrote on the Crimean War and who came to India in 1858 to report on “the rumours on atrocities against British men, women and children ...and to inquire into the circumstances of the failure of the British rule in India which had been brought to light by the Mutiny”, did not even mention Mangal Pandey in his published diaries.¹²

Yet it is clear at the same time that the British had some perception of a general discontent over questions of religion and greased cartridges that was growing among the sepoys and that Mangal Pandey typified for them. Some sense of the British

feelings is conveyed by Martin Richard Gubbins, a member of the Bengal Civil Service and the financial commissioner for Awadh in what he wrote in his contemporary account of the "mutinies in Oudh". It was in April 1857 that Gubbins said, "uneasiness first begun to be felt by the authorities at Lucknow respecting the allegiance of the native soldiers quartered at that capital. During the two preceding months, the newspapers had made known the general repugnance felt by the sepoys to the use of the new cartridges. We had heard of the mutiny of the 19th Regiment of Native Infantry at Berhampore, and its disbandment at Barrackpore. The feelings of the disbanded soldiers was known to be anything but friendly".¹³ George Treveleyan's book on the events in Kanpur, first published in 1865, dates British "uneasiness" from even earlier: "from about the middle of January 1857 onward".¹⁴ It is the emergence of Mangal Pandey as a type (to the British) in this context that is signalled by the fact that Pandey's name "gave rise to the description of all (rebellious sepoys) ... as 'Pandies'".¹⁵ Or as Treveleyan put it, with all the force of contemporary British prejudice: "Mungul Pandey was condemned by court-martial and duly hanged on the 8th of April ... Public opinion had become less squeamish before the year was out. From this miserable fanatic was taken the name of 'Pandy', which in Anglo-Indian slang signified a mutineer."¹⁶

There is very little in contemporary descriptions of Pandey's mutiny that suggests the figure of a nationalist hero. In most accounts of Pandey in his state of rebellion – when he came out wearing his "regimental dress" on top of his dhoti and carrying a loaded musket – is described as calling out to his comrades exhorting them to come out and defend their religion. There is nothing about the freedom of the country in the early reports of his statements. There is, of course, some debate about whether he was under the influence of "bhang or opium, or both"; it was also suggested at the time that he "suffered from epilepsy" – but that by itself is neither here nor there.¹⁷ Local histories that preserve the memories of Mangal Pandey and his ancestors – such as Ram Vichar Pande's *Shaheed Mangal Pandey* (incidentally, a title first conferred on Pandey by Savarkar – see below) or Durga Prasad Gupta's *Ballia aur uske Niwasi* – reportedly focus on the piety of the Pandey family.¹⁸ Local memories of Mangal Pandey are quite clearly tied up more with the local

honour and ritual status of this brahmin family – his grandfather Shivnarain, we are told, for example, was versed in astrology, or that sweetmeats worth rupees seventeen were distributed when Pandey was born in 1828 (or alternatively in 1831), that his father Jagannath Pandey used to worship in the Shiva temple “just behind their house” in the village of Nagwa of the Ballia district (Uttar Pradesh) and so on.¹⁹ M L Bhargava who summarises these local fables in a collection of documents on 1857 and who once acted as a member of the History of Freedom Movement Committee of Uttar Pradesh adds a nationalist icing on top of this cake of local sentiments with his assertion that “Mangal Pandey...shall remain memorable in Free India as a martyr for the freedom of motherland”.²⁰

In fact, we know so little about the real Mangal Pandey that the only way to make him into a hero is to create a composite character – stick into the sketchy outlines we have of his life details from other places, other lives and other times. Anachronism has to be the name of the game. William Dalrymple is probably right in his observation in his recent book, *The Last Mughal*, that it was the young Savarkar who first raised Pandey to the status of being an icon of Indian nationalism.²¹ Savarkar devoted a chapter to him in his nationalist-classic, *The Indian War of Independence*. The chapter is significantly titled ‘Shahid Mangal Pandey’.²² Savarkar portrays Pandey as a hero of 1857 by describing him as a “valiant young man” and “a brahmin (who) took up the duties of a kshatriya,” whose love of “his religion” was more than that of “his life”. “Pure in his private life and undaunted in battle, the idea of the freedom of his country had entered and electrified his blood.”²³ Savarkar’s Mangal Pandey says and experiences things not supported by historical evidence:

The idea that his brethren were going to be insulted before him fired Mangal Pandey’s heart, and he began to insist that his own regiment should rise on the same very day. When he heard that the leaders of the Organisation would not consent to his plan, the young man’s spirit became uncontrollable, and he at once snatched and loaded his gun, and jumped on the parade ground, shouting “Rise! Ye brethren rise! I bind you by the oaths of your religion! Come, let us rise and attack the treacherous enemies for the sake of our freedom.”²⁴

The “organisation” that Savarkar assumed into existence has never been proven to have really existed. Pandey walked up and

down in front of the quarter-guard rather than "jump on to the parade ground" and, by all accounts, the historical Pandey did not utter a single word about "our freedom". He did speak about religion though.

Aamir Khan does something similar to Savarkar. Savarkar created a Mangal Pandey whom the reader could imagine as a hero of the nation's epic struggle for freedom. As he once said in an issue of the *Tulwar*, the organ of the Abhinava Bharat Revolutionary Society, his objective was – "subject to historical accuracy" (a rule he did not always observe) – "to inspire his people with a burning desire to rise again and wage a second successful war to liberate the motherland".²⁵ The chapter on Mangal Pandey ended with the call: "Let every mother teach her son the story of this hero with pride".²⁶

Aamir Khan also wants to make Mangal Pandey seem like the hero of "the rising". The film therefore deliberately takes many liberties with history. Thus, one would not know, watching the film, that the incident of a low-caste (not necessarily "untouchable") 'lascar' (or 'khalasee' in some accounts) taunting a brahmin sepoy about his caste-consciousness while informing him of the greased cartridges was an incident that reportedly took place in Dum Dum in January 1857 and was not a part of the historical Mangal Pandey's life.²⁷ Nor would they know that it was around Meerut and about May in 1857 that "courtesans of the bazaar brothels" began to taunt the troopers, "egging on the men to rescue their 85 comrades from the gaol".²⁸ Nor would the delightfully creative anachronism of a character like Captain Gordon be obvious to the viewer. As several scholars have pointed out, the sepoy-officer relationship was actually undergoing a change between c 1820 and 1850 as the older type of officers who "wrestled" with their sepoys and "gave nautches for the regiment" were being replaced by a new type – men who knew less of the sepoys and of their languages and practices, men who readily address the latter as "nigger" or 'suwar' (pig). Sir Charles Napier had, in fact, lamented this development some years before 1857.²⁹

Besides, the film operates with an image of the brahmin that is fundamentally ahistorical and orientalist. This is the brahmin who is always – and under any circumstances – hyper-sensitive about his caste-status and the rituals of purity, an image that

also was peddled by popular British histories of 1857 both in the 19th and the 20th centuries. British historians of 1857 writing for a general readership went to some length to explain to their readers why a brahmin soldier may have been really upset to be told by a low-caste person of the danger posed by greased cartridges to their standing in the caste-system. This was the gloss supplied by T R E Holmes for the English reader of the 19th century:

It is hard to convey to the mind of an English reader an adequate idea of the force of the shock beneath which the imagination of that brahmin must have reeled when he heard these words... It must be remembered that not faith, not righteousness, but ritual was the essence of his religion. For him to be told that he was to touch with his lips the fat of the cow was as appalling as it would have been to a mediaeval Catholic to listen to the sentence of excommunication.³⁰

Richard Hilton, once a major-general in the British-Indian army, who wrote a "centenary history" of 1857, sought to assist his mid-20th-century reader with another parallel, stereotyping the brahmin and "a cultured European" with equal force. He wrote: "To appreciate fully the shocked surprise of the brahmin, one must try to imagine a cultured European, of particular personal habits, being asked by some filthy tramp [the place of the low-caste person] for the loan of his toothbrush."³¹

What such stereotypes – and the film *MP* – overlook is the strong possibility, or perhaps even the fact, that the heightened consciousness, on the part of the brahmin sepoys of the Bengal army, of being brahmins may have been a product, not of any eternal brahminism, but of the very employment policies of the East India Company. As Dalrymple writes, perceptively: "Encouraged to regard themselves as an elite by the British, the northern Indian peasant farmers [many of them brahmins] who became sepoys had grown to become very particular about the preparation and eating of their food, and notions of caste, which in India had traditionally been relatively fluid, underwent a process of "Sanskritisation", as the sepoys came to understand such issues being central to their notions of self respect."³² This point was not unfamiliar to the British in the 19th century. Sir Charles Napier had issued a warning long before 1857. He said: "The most important thing which I reckon injurious to the

Indian army is the immense influence given to caste; instead of being discouraged, it has been encouraged in the Bengal army; in the Bombay army it is discouraged; and that army is in better order than the army of Bengal, in which the brahmins have been leaders in every mutiny.”³³

There is no such historical perspective in *MP*. Much ink has, therefore, been understandably dispensed in both India and the UK on the factual errors that are strewn throughout *MP*. Saul David noted that while he was no “apologist of the East India Company”, there is no “evidence” that supports the film’s assertions pertaining to prostitution and slavery.³⁴ He also questioned the idea, so central to the film, that the events of 1857 were sparked off by the East India Company using cartridges greased with cow and pig fat. Interestingly, two books (although from different vantage points) on Mangal Pandey were published in India the same year that the film was released. One of them *Mangal Pandey: The True Story of an Indian Revolutionary* by Amarendra Misra celebrated Pandey’s valour as is suggested by his title. The other by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?* adopts a more complex understanding of Pandey.³⁵ Mukherjee (basing his observations upon works by authors like Kaye, Malleson and others) draws attention to the fact that Mangal Pandey was a name that continued to haunt the British. The myth that surrounds the name of Mangal Pandey writes Mukherjee, “is a British creation”. Briefly, Mukherjee’s arguments can be summarised as follows: Pandey had acted in a fit of intoxication. The revolt of 1857 was a collective endeavour without a single author. To ascribe its origins to the acts of a lone, inebriated sepoy would therefore be historically fallacious.

Yet historians’ objections to *MP*, while they may have been based on facts, are surprising as the film begins with a disclaimer that should have disarmed the historically-minded. The disclaimer appears before the title sequence and says in no uncertain terms that:

This story is based on actual events. In certain cases incidents, characters and timelines have been changed or fictionalised for dramatic purposes. Certain characters may be dramatic composites or entirely fictitious. Some names and locations have been changed. The scenes depicted may be a hybrid of fact and fiction which fairly

represent the source materials for the film believed to be true by the filmmakers.

There is no denying that *MP* creates Mangal Pandey into a composite character. He is not entirely fictitious but he is not entirely historical either. There is little doubt from the start that this is not a “historical” that is about history alone. To criticise the film in terms of its historical shortcomings is to make a confusion of categories or genres. This point is simple enough and would not be unknown to our historians. Why then the confusion and the subsequent criticisms?

MEDIA, MEMORY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE PEOPLE

This is where we enter the more speculative and the concluding part of our argument.

There were certain responses to *MP* within India that raised questions about how the past – and 1857 in particular – circulates in popular memory and in popular rituals of memorialisation that are not, as we shall see, unconnected to questions of how democracy and mass media influence each other. It was reported that people in Ballia, reportedly Mangal Pandey’s native district, held demonstrations demanding the deletion of what they deemed were the “offending” portions in film. Clearly they were referring to scenes that showed Pandey getting intimate with the prostitute Heera.³⁶ The same newspaper reported that the villagers took out a mock funeral procession under the banner of Swaraj Darshan, a local theatre group, and burnt an effigy of filmmaker Ketan Mehta at the district headquarters. *The Indian Express* reported that the film was considered offensive by the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh Mulayam Singh Yadav who issued a statement saying that “his government was examining the film after charges that the script had showed the freedom war hero visiting a brothel”. The fact that the film did not mention Pandey’s native village Nagwa was also found highly objectionable. “These are issues related to the legendary hero and cannot be taken lightly, since it hurts public sentiments and will be banned if the allegations are found to be true”, declared Yadav.³⁷ A kind of mass hysteria accompanied the release of the film in certain pockets of the country. Since Pandey belonged to the infantry regiment in Barrackpore, the local townspeople

inaugurated a statue of Mangal Pandey coinciding with the national release of the film, while a senior official of the Indian army released it.³⁸

We suggest that the criticisms and concerns expressed about this film in the print media had something to do with the unavoidable recognition of the power of a mass-medium like film to shape popular memories or perceptions of the past. Semanti Ghosh's Bengali article 'Kalpanar Hysteria' or "the hysteria of imagination" best captures some of these concerns. Briefly put, the concerns expressed about films such as *MP* have to do with the impact that falsification of historical fact would have on the minds of the young (Indian) cine-goer.³⁹ Implicit in these fears is an acknowledgement that film today is much more pervasive and powerful than print at captivating and kindling popular imagination. To expose young or "ignorant" minds to the fabrication of history, something that allegedly saturates the text of *MP*, could potentially have a deleterious impact on the received pedagogy of thousands of viewers.

This is a long-standing concern with its own transnational history but it has some specifically Indian inflections as well.⁴⁰ Let us briefly recapitulate the transnational aspect of the problem first. Historians (with individual exceptions) have often expressed a degree of concern about filmic rendition of the past. An eminent historian of our times, for instance, reports a certain feeling of unease with the way film-makers market "experience" as a way of getting access to the past. We refer here to Natalie Davis' discussion of two films, Stephen Spielberg's *Amistad* and Oprah Winfrey's *Beloved*, both depicting slavery on screen. Winfrey thus explained her own objectives in creating this filmic rendition of Toni Morrison's novel: "I wanted people to be able to feel deeply on a very personal level what it meant to be a slave, what slavery did to people, and also be liberated by that knowledge". She is reported to have said to her scriptwriter and fellow-producer, "This is my *Schindler's List*".⁴¹ Spielberg similarly used "considerable dramatic licence", reports Davis, in *Amistad* so as to make it "symbolic of a struggle that continues to this day" in the form of "immigrants brought in illegally to work in sweatshops".⁴² Davis, as a historian, is clearly unhappy about this collapsing of the distance between the past and the present. She does not go as far as Louis Gottschalk of the

University of Chicago did when, in 1935, he wrote the following to the President of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer:

If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes it to its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticise and revise it.⁴³

But, clearly, it has been a losing battle in the last 70 odd years for those on Gottschalk's side. Davis presents a weaker version of the Gottschalk argument but, for her, the presentism that is often endemic to filmic representation is an issue. She writes: "The play of imagination in picturing resistance to slavery can follow the rules of evidence when possible, and the spirit of evidence when details are lacking."⁴⁴ At the very least, film-makers should follow the principle of separating the past from the present and not collapse that distinction into one single experience. "Strange-ness in history", she writes, should be sustained "along with familiar". Or, as she puts it in another place in the book: historical films should "let the past be the past".⁴⁵

The film-studies critic Tom Gunning has clarified what threatens the enterprise of the historian here. He emphasises how films make the past available by making it vivid thereby converting it directly into an object of embodied "experience". This is very different from the ideal of re-enacting the past in the historian's mind. In Gunning's words:

...film provides indelible images of some of the 20th century's great events. Our horrified consciousness of the Holocaust relies partly on the filmed images from the liberation of the camps, and our knowledge of the devastation of the Atomic bomb comes partly from motion pictures of Hiroshima or of A-bomb test explosions. Conversely, twentieth-century disasters or traumas that went unrecorded by motion pictures – such as the genocide of the Armenians or mass starvation in Asia – are less present in public consciousness because of the lack of vivid images... . Fictional films serve as historical evidence in the same way that other representational art forms do – by making events vivid.... [A]s a form of mass visual entertainment, films reflect social attitudes in a specific and vivid manner.⁴⁶

Such vividness that is not mediated and controlled by the abstract form of historical reasoning that academic historians

employ could, it is feared, destroy the principle of historical objectivity.

At issue here is not just the aesthetic or academic question of historical objectivity. This objectivity, one may argue, is a critical tool of a certain conception of democracy as well. The question can therefore easily become political. The coming of mass-media emphasising audio-visual forms of reception and judgment has globally changed the nature of the public sphere in democracies. Instead of the 18th century model described by Habermas – a public sphere based, ultimately, on the individual's capacity for disembodied reasoning, a “brains in vats” model, really – we have public spheres animated by the direct appeal to the senses (as well as reasoning) that a medium like films can make. (Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* is an excellent case in point.)

One can read what was said for and against *MP* in the Indian press as a version of this transnational or global debate about democracy. But the debate takes on a particular form in India, and especially so when it comes to remembering 1857. The business of remembering 1857 has always split Indians, one could say. On the one hand, there is the tradition that Savarkar inaugurated – of calling 1857 the first war of independence. This tradition has never quite died. Leaving aside the question of use of Savarkar by nationalists such as Subhas Chandra Bose and confining our remarks to academics alone, it is interesting to see that even R C Majumdar, who otherwise disagreed with S B Chaudhuri's characterisation of 1857 as a “civil disturbance”, judged that Mangal Pandey “fully deserves the honour of the first martyr which posterity has given him”.⁴⁷ Rudrangshu Mukherjee saw 1857 as a “popular” rebellion – which S N Sen, C A Bayly, and others have granted in the case of Awadh.⁴⁸ And, indeed, as we have stated before, Om Puri's voice-over in *MP* clearly calls 1857 “the first war of independence”.

Some very eminent nationalists, on the other hand, opposed the Savarkar line of thinking soon after independence. Consider the then education minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's Foreword to S N Sen's official centenary history of 1857. Azad asked for an “objective” piece of history in order to oppose the way of thinking associated with Savarkar. He wrote, referring indirectly to Savarkar: “Some Indians have written on the struggle in the

early years of this century. If the truth is to be told, ... the books they have written are not history but mere propaganda. These authors wanted to represent the uprising as a planned war of independence organised by the nobility of India against the British government." This, Azad thought, was baseless. It was "ridiculous", for instance, to consider Ali Naqi Khan "one of the chief conspirators" when he was "completely a henchman of the East India Company" and whom the people of Lucknow "looked upon ... as a traitor".⁴⁹

Yet 1857 has always cast a long shadow across the terrain of Indian politics ever since it happened. The Quit India movement in Bihar often brought back – both to the nationalists and British officials – memories of it.⁵⁰ The mobilisation against vasectomy in northern India during the Emergency reminded many of the events of the 19th century, and with the advent of *Subaltern Studies* in the 1980s, Ranajit Guha famously saw in 1857 a paradigmatic form of peasant insurgency that was central to his conceptualisation of Indian politics having two necessary domains and idioms: an elite one represented by leaders such as Nehru and a "popular" or subaltern one that classically followed and expressed the logic of insurgency that Guha discerned in 1857 and other similar events.⁵¹

We submit that the concerns expressed around Aamir Khan's and Ketan Mehta's portrayal of Mangal Pandey speak to an unresolved question of Indian democracy, a question that acquires urgency the more mass forms of democracy take root in India. This is the question of the two domains – to stay for the moment with Guha's formulation – could be combined into a "politics of the people" that would give Indian democracy both a working sense of sovereignty (an effective rule of law, that is) and a lively sense of being truly a democracy (a rule of the demos). The Constitution was written in the name of a category called "the people of India". That was an example of performative speech. But in the everyday we have had several and very different – and one might even say, competing – ways of imagining what a "politics of the people" might look like and how the category "people" might be represented in politics. There, firstly, was the Nehruvian imagination of "the people" after independence – a "people" as committed to the nation as the nation was committed to its people(s). In the world of

Bombay films, this equation of a romanticised category called "the people" with the nation shifted from the historical to the social in the period immediately after independence. This imaginary was most vividly brought to life in song sequences from films of the 1950s where the slum, the street, the city became the ground of play for "the people". These were sites where the ordinary, the average work-a-day person, the socially under-privileged, and poor were portrayed as "subjects" whose playfulness, heroism, joys and sorrows could be properly realised in some vision of national unity. Songs like 'Dil Ka Haal Sune Dil Wala', 'Ramaiyah Wasta Vaiah', 'Mera Joota Hai Japani', 'Yeh Hai Bombay Meri Jaan' were all redolent with image of "the people" as sovereign despite their financial impoverishment and other social handicaps.

But this 1950s imagination of the people as the subaltern equivalent of the nation withered as the decades wore on and the older nationalist or socialist imagination of the "masses" as a united agency ceased to be viable. Politics of caste, of dalit self-assertion, of reservations, of the rise of the criminal-politicians and of the mafia, of widespread corruption have fragmented the category of the "people" into many other forms of representation some of which have been portrayed, for instance, by Sanjay Dutt, notably in his *Munnabhai* films. As has been so aptly demonstrated by scholars like Ravi Vasudevan, Ranjini Mazumdar and others, cinema's investment in this category of the "people" is now performed via repeated engagements with notions of criminality, the fracturing of the urban space, the corrosion of a moral economy – in short with an attempt to demonstrate how and under what social pressures the category has been splintered and robbed of all buoyancy.⁵²

MP, then, becomes an interesting and intriguing film when we see it as a part of a cluster of films – *Lagaan*, *Rang de Basanti* – that have sought to rescue this category called "the people" and that centre around the depiction of its main actor, Aamir Khan, as a citizen hero. This presentation of the hero – preserving intact his heroic qualities but cathecting his entire existence on to an imagined, romantic category called "the people" – is accomplished through a wilful manipulation of Indian history. Khan as Mangal Pandey or Bhuvan (in *Lagaan*) or Daljeet (in *Rang de Basanti*) would have no existence as a character without the films

also simultaneously hypostatising a greater category – the people. *MP*, like some other films that Khan appeared in, resonates with an effort to grapple with the present, to find succour for the problems of the contemporary by recasting the past. Interestingly, all these films bypass the immediate post-independence decades, a close engagement with which might offer a more linear account of the present. Instead all of these films undertake a temporal loop into the colonial period in which they embed the category of the people. The films appear to pose viewers with the question of whether or not we would have a different “now”, and certainly a different future, if the past were to be altered by these instances of popular agency. In other words, the process by which the films accomplish or provoke in the viewer the capacity to imagine a new “now” is by energising and dramatising with the aid of melodrama and spectacle – the two most favoured and assured tropes of Hindi cinema – the entity of the people. It is the people that emerge as the protagonist in the trio, *Lagaan*, *MP*, and *Rang de Basanti*. Much like *Lagaan* (2001) and *Rang de Basanti* (2006) – two films that preceded and followed *MP* – the latter too can be read as recuperating this imaginative category of the people that has died in Bollywood cinema.

What may appear disturbing about the use of the past in this rendition of “the people” in *MP* is precisely what remains unresolved in Indian democracy, and that is the relationship between the “popular” and the “democratic”. The Nehruvian dream of an orderly, disciplined (we use this word advisedly) democracy comes up everyday against the resistance of “popular” politics of various kinds. At the centre of these clashes internal to the cultures of Indian democracy are questions of pedagogy. How will we learn to make our society ever more democratic? Can we have a democracy that abandons the ideals of a Habermasian public sphere and the rule of law? But *who* will instil these ideas and in *whom*? Who will be the teachers and who will be the taught? It is on these kinds of questions that elitist answers founder. Will the “people” be merely an object of representation or will they, in some ways, speak directly for themselves? Can they be their own teachers? The anxiety expressed by some on this score seems legitimate, for – as 1857 and numerous other instances of subaltern politics make clear – while there is something inherently democratic about the popular,

the popular by itself does not ever guarantee the achievement of a democratic culture that, say, treasures the individual or the right of dissent. Aamir Khan's *Mangal Pandey* speaks to this dilemma that is quite central to the evolving politics of Indian democracy.⁵³

NOTES

- 1 Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema At the End Of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2006, pp 205-06. Words in parenthesis ours.
- 2 Ibid, p 206.
- 3 On questions of realism in Hindi films, see Ashish Rajyadhaksha, 'Realism, Modernism and Post-colonial Theory' in John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson eds, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp 415- 25; Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1847-1987*, Austin, University of Texas Press, Texas, 1993; and Madhav Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Reconstruction*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998. The words within quotes are quoted somewhat out of context from Natalie Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2000, p 136.
- 4 Jaikumar, *Cinema*, p 216.
- 5 Sharmistha Gooptu, 'Mangal Pandey: Is History Important?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 27, 2005.
- 6 Ziya Us Salam, 'Wreaking Havoc with History', *The Hindu*, August 26, 2005.
- 7 Lindsay Pereira, 'The Rising: History Comes Alive', August 12, 2005, <http://in.rediff.com/movies/2005/aug/12aamir.htm>
- 8 Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p xiii.
- 9 Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny 1857*, Penguin, London, 2003, Chapter 7 entitled 'Mungul Pandy', pp 67-77, has much of the historical detail about Pandey's mutiny that is currently available.
- 10 P J O Taylor ed, *A Companion to the "Indian Mutiny" of 1857*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, p 209, entry on 'Mangal Pandey'.
- 11 Greased cartridges had been first imported in 1853. For some details of early disaffection about the cartridges, see Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty Seven*, Publications Division, Delhi, Government of India, 1995 (first published 1957), pp 40-45.
- 12 See William Howard Russell, *My Indian Mutiny Diary*, ed, Michael Edwardes, Cassell and Co, London, 1957 (first pub 1860).
- 13 Martin Richard Gubbins, *An Account of the Mutinies in Oudh, and of the Siege of the Lucknow Residency; with Some Observations on the Conditions of the Province of Oudh, and on the Causes of the Mutiny in the Bengal Army*, Richard Bentley, London, 1858, pp 1-2.
- 14 Sir George Treveleyan, *Cawnpore*, Macmillan, London, 1907 (first pub 1865), pp 24-25.

- 15 Taylor, *Companion*, p 209.
- 16 Treveleyan, *Cawnpore*, p 29.
- 17 Taylor, *Companion*, p 209. Scholars pointing to the effect of ‘bhang’ on Pandey’s decision to rebel often seem to overlook the point that an intoxicant may, under certain circumstances, very well work to facilitate “agency” for human beings. It is also interesting to note that the point about Pandey’s being under the influence of bhang was perhaps first made by his co-sepoys who may have said it to exonerate both him and themselves in the hope of a lighter punishment. We are told that it was on being admonished by General Hearsey that that the sepoys of the 34th Regiment said “with one voice” of Pandey – “He is mad – had taken *bhung*... to excess”. See M L Bhargava, *Saga of 1857: Success and Failures*, Reliance Publishing House, Delhi, 1992, p 37.
- 18 Bhargava, *Saga*, pp 49-51.
- 19 Bhargava, *Saga*, pp 49-50.
- 20 Bhargava, *Saga*, p 53
- 21 William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, Delhi, 1857, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, 2006, p 20.
- 22 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence*, Phoenix, Bombay, 1947, first published 1909, Part II, Chapter 1, pp 101-06.
- 23 Savarkar, *War*, p 103.
- 24 Savarkar, *War*, p 103.
- 25 Cited by G M Joshi in his Foreword ‘The Story of this History’ to Savarkar, *War*, p x.
- 26 Savarkar, *War*, p 105.
- 27 Even as a historical incident, this has many versions. For example, R C Majumdar, basing himself on a letter by General Hearsey, dates the incident to “early January 1857” and describes the “low-caste” person as a ‘khalasi’. R C Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Firma K L, Calcutta (1957), 1963, Book 2, Chapter 1, p 69. T R E Holmes in his then-popular book, *A History of the Indian Mutiny and the Disturbances Which Accompanied it Among the Civil Population*, W H Allen and Co, London, 1891 (4th edn, first pub 1883, reprinted 1885, 1888), p 78 gives simply “one day in January, 1857” as the date of the incident and reports the low-caste person to have been a ‘lascar’. Major-General Richard Hilton’s *The Indian Mutiny: A Centenary History*, Hollis and Carter, London, 1957, p 25, on the other hand – and after making much heavy weather of how “perversion of history can be a powerful weapon of propaganda (p 1) – surprisingly homes in on “the middle of January” as the precise date for this “strange incident” without telling us what his authority may have been for such a date.
- 28 P O J Taylor, *What Really Happened During the Mutiny: A Day-by-Day Account of the Major Events of 1857-1859 in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p 45.
- 29 See the discussion in Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny*, pp 34-44 and Michael Edwardes, *Red Year: The Rebellion of 1857*, Cardinal, London, 1975, pp 21-22. Treveleyan, *Cawnpore*, p 36, writes: “And so it came to pass that [for the European army officers in India] to be sent back to headquarters

was ‘a shame’, regimental duty was ‘a bore’, and the sepoys were ‘niggers’. That hateful word ... made its first appearance in decent society during the years which immediately preceded the mutiny.”

- 30 Holmes, *A History*, p 78.
- 31 Hilton, *The Indian Mutiny*, p 25.
- 32 Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, p 135. Words in parenthesis ours. See also the footnote in Dalrymple on this page.
- 33 Napier cited in Charles Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny giving a detailed account of the Sepoy insurrection in India; and a concise history of the great military events which have tended to consolidate British Empire in Hindostan*, Vol 1, Master Publishers, New Delhi, nd (1859), p 36.
- 34 Saul David cited in Khalid Ansari, ‘Brits Rising against Mangal’, *Midday*, August 18, 2005. He is also cited in a story on Mangal Pandey by the BBC. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//1/hi/entertainment/film/4151152.stm> Published: 2005/08/14 16:39:14 GMT.
- 35 Amaresh Misra, *Mangal Pandey: The True Story of an Indian Revolutionary*, Rupa & Co, New Delhi, 2005; Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?*, Penguin, Delhi, 2005.
- 36 ‘Mangal Pandey Irks Native Villagers’, *The Statesman*, July 29, 2005.
- 37 ‘UP Government Considering Banning Aamir Khan Starrer’, *The Indian Express*, August 15, 2005.
- 38 Semanti Ghosh, ‘Kalpanar Hysteria’ ‘The Hysteria of Imagination’, *Anandabazar Patrika*, August 14, 2005.
- 39 Ghosh, ‘Kalpanar Hysteria’.
- 40 In this part of the argument, we draw on Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘History and the Politics of Recognition’ in Alan Jenkins and Keith Munsow eds, *Manifestos for Historians*, Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming. See also the discussion in Chakrabarty, ‘Itihaser janajibon’ [The Public Life of History], in Bengali, *Anustup*, Annual/Puja number, October 2005.
- 41 Winfrey cited in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on the Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2000), p 99.
- 42 Davis, *Slavery*, p 131.
- 43 Gottschalk cited in Robert A Rosenstone, ‘The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age’ in Marcia Landy ed, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in the Media*, Rutgers University Press (Rutgers, N.J, 2001), p 50. The quote originally occurs in Peter Novick’s, *A Noble Dream*.
- 44 Davis, *Slavery*, p 136.
- 45 Ibid, pp 131, 136.
- 46 Tom Gunning, *Making Sense of Films* on <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/>. Indeed, even some British schools appear to be teaching their students the history of British imperialism in India today through Bollywood films. As Amit Roy recently reported in the Kolkata *Telegraph*: “Andrew Robinson, history master at Eton College, keeps a copy of *Lagaan* handy to acquaint his boys with the scholarship of India’s best-known historians, Aamir Khan and Ashutosh Gowariker. Most Britons also take their knowledge of Gandhi from Richard Attenborough’s Oscar-winning movie.” Amit Roy, ‘India Divides Britain’, *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), December 28, 2006.

- 47 Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, p 74.
- 48 Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984; see Bayly's comments in Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857*, ed, C A Bayly, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p 236.
- 49 Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, 'Foreword' to S N Sen, *Eighteen Fifty Seven*, pp xvi-xvii.
- 50 This is discussed in Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'In the Name of Politics: Sovereignty and the Multitude in Indian Democracy', first published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006) and forthcoming in a revised form in Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar, and Andrew Sartori eds, *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: The Transition in India and Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2007.
- 51 See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, and his contribution to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* (1982).
- 52 See Ravi Vasudevan, 'Disreputable and Illegal Publics: Cinematic Allegories in Times of Crisis' in *Sarai Reader, Crisis/Media*, 2004, pp 71-79; 'An Imperfect Public: Cinema and Citizenship in the 'Third World'' in *Old Media/New Media: Ongoing Histories, Sarai Reader*, 2001, pp 57-70; Ranjini Mazumdar, 'Ruin and the Uncanny City: Memory, Despair, and Death in Parinda', *Sarai Reader: The Cities of Everyday Life*, 2002, pp 68-77.
- 53 Some of these questions are taken up in Chakrabarty, 'In the Name of Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006.

1857: Visibilising the ‘Other’ in History

Courtesans and the Revolt

Lata Singh

I

HISTORY has been emerging as an important site of contestation, especially for those on the margins. The voice of the common people had been invisibilised in history for a long time. However attempts have been made to bring common people to the forefront of history. The past is being excavated from the viewpoint of the subaltern. Women’s voices are also being brought to the forefront. Still a significant section of women’s history, especially of those on the margins – considered the “other” woman in the construction of middle class women – remains invisible. The “other” women represented common women, considered to be coarse, vulgar, loud, morally degraded and sexually promiscuous. Having greater access to the public sphere, these women were relatively independent, outside rigid formations and not so clearly contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space, and so considered threatening. Bringing these women as subjects into history would unsettle the middle class “respectable” discourse.

One important section that has been excluded from history is women performers. Nationalist discourses have always negated or erased their creative aspect by keeping them out of the framework of the respectable nation. The question of “respectability” assumed its sharpest form with regard to issues concerning women, as redefinition of the female was a crucial feature of the hegemony that brought the middle class into power. If the struggle to represent ideal female behaviour accompanied the struggle of an emergent middle class, then change in the representation of women would be expected to

accompany more extensive historical changes. The representation of women as public entertainer and locus of male desire no longer served the interests of the English-educated elite, who put in her place the Indian equivalent of the Victorian domestic angel, the “sugrihini” or good-housewife [Sangari and Vaid 1989]. Female performers became stigmatised in educated discourse as “prostitutes”.

This article brings to the forefront one such performing community, that is, courtesans, a section of women belonging to a singing and dancing community. Generally depiction of the characters of courtesans is extremely iconic. There are fictions about them. They acquire in their ordinariness and everydayness an archetypal image. ‘Tawaif’, the term used for a courtesan, has accumulated over time moralistic, value-loaded connotations; in the popular mindset it was equated to a whore, forcing these women performers into silence. When they did speak, they had to reinvent themselves through polite myths to reinforce their self-esteem, which had consistently been battered by references to them as fallen and dangerous women. They had to constantly camouflage their personas, a crucial process to make them into the legends that they were. By the end of the 19th century, tawaif had become an impolite word not used in genteel conversation; in the popular mindset the tawaif was equated to a whore. Unfortunately little remains of the writings of these women, considered to be the most educated women of their times. Many did write poetry, but even this seems to have been censored out of literary canon. Compounding the silence of these women has been the silence of scholars, thus leaving gaping holes in social history [Kidwai 2004]. Even in the writings of feminist scholars, these women have remained invisible. The feminists were limited by their own class bias and by their continued adherence to a “separate sphere” ideology that stressed women’s purity, moral supremacy and domestic virtues.

This article is based on a present-day play ‘Azizun Nisa San Sattavan Ka Kissa’ (A Courtesan and 1857 Revolt, 1999) written by Tripurari Sharma, who is a playwright, director and professor of National School of Drama in New Delhi. In most of Tripurari Sharma’s work, voices of the marginalised section, especially women, provide the vantage point from which the contest over established norms and practices of the dominant

order is brought to the forefront. The main protagonist of the play is Azizun Nisa, a courtesan, who joined the sepoys in Kanpur when they revolted against the British in 1857. Azizun Nisa used to dress like a man. She was very close to sepoys and during 1857 her place becomes an important meeting point for rebel sepoys. She is said to have been behind the massacre of the British women and children in Kanpur, which was part of the history of the mutiny. She was from Lucknow but had settled in Kanpur. She had a very public affair with Shamsuddin Sawar of the 42nd Cavalry, who was on the frontline of the mutiny in Kanpur and died in the revolt [Sharma 2005]. By looking at the role of courtesans in 1857 the author has added an important dimension to the historiography of revolt, which suffers from the same limitation, that is, the invisibility of common women. The study on "ordinary rebels" of the 1857 rebellion remains focused on the participation of men [Stokes 1986; Bhadra 1988]. Barring leaders such as Rani Laxmibai, in most discussions of the rebellion, the participation of ordinary women has received little attention. That is why Sharma's play becomes very significant from a historical point of view.

There is historical evidence of these women playing a very significant role in politics but their political voice is invisibilised in mainstream history writing. The bedia community, a traditional caste whose profession is singing and dancing, associates with the event of 1857 with great pride. Evidence is also coming in as to how women from the singing community raised money for the Congress Party. They generously gave of their time when they had to raise money for charity. Jaddan Bai financially helped the left-leaning Progressive Writers' Association. But their presence caused an uneasy tension amongst the middle class. The presence of Gauhar Jan, India's first recording megastar, at a Congress session was objected to by respectable lady supporters and the singer was asked to keep away. It is said that once, piqued that Gandhi did not show up for one of her fund-raising events, sending a representative instead, she donated only half of what she had promised [Kidwai 2004:49].

Thus Sharma's play can be seen as an attempt to rewrite dominant versions of historical truth and relocate the "loose" subjects of colonial history into their proper roles in anti-colonial struggles too. Besides, what makes the play particularly significant is

not just retrieving those on the margins, which were denied agency or a presence by the colonialist project of (mis)representations, but also to bring them back into the creative domain.

II

The play has an element of historicity as the author has looked at historical records, documents and memoirs in the library and archives. Azizun Nisa's name is mentioned in historical records and she is reported to have played an important role in the 1857 Revolt in Kanpur. In Kanpur, Azizun Nisa is alive in people's minds and memory and people talk about her with great fervour and passion.¹ There is historical evidence of courtesans playing a role in the 1857 revolt. Their role is documented as covert but get generous financiers of the action. These women, though patently non-combatants, were penalised for their alleged instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels. The British officials were aware that their homes functioned as meeting points and looked upon these places with suspicion, as dens of political conspiracy. In fact, after quelling the rebellion of 1857 the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow. The courtesans' names were on the lists of property confiscated by British officials for proven involvement in the siege and rebellion against colonial rule in 1857 [Talwar Oldenburg 1984].

There is a view that the courtesans participated in the 1857 Revolt because they were under the control of nawabs. Nawabs were against the British as colonial rule had eroded their power. However, this argument denies agency and political voice to these women. According to Sharma, it was not necessary for the courtesans to participate even if they were under the nawabs. Azizun Nisa could have done anything, could have even forsaken the revolt and left, as fighting and dying for a cause is very rare. There was no compulsion or pressure on her to participate in the revolt. In fact, Azizun Nisa was not even under anybody's protection. She stayed in Kanpur city and ran her 'kotha'. Her mother was a courtesan in Lucknow. So Azizun Nisa must have left the city of Lucknow, a centre of culture, where the courtesans enjoyed patronage and settled in Kanpur. Sharma feels that her reason for coming to Kanpur may have been her strong passion for independence. She probably did not want to stay

under someone's patronage. In fact, Kanpur was a city of 'bazaars' and not liked by the courtesans. They felt that the clients of Kanpur did not have royal taste, culture and refinement as compared to the clients in Lucknow.² Hence, to examine the reasons for the participation of courtesans in the 1857 Revolt one needs to look at the historical context.

III

The courtesans were an influential female elite at all Hindu and Muslim courts in the many kingdoms that made up the subcontinent before the British began to displace the rulers. Lucknow emerged as an important cultural centre. The courtesans of Lucknow established themselves as a notable group of women in the 80 odd years that the Avadh dynasty had Lucknow as its capital city, under the lavish patronage of the chief noblemen, merchants, and the official elite. Ensconced in equally lavish apartments in the bazaars of Chowk and in the Kaiser Bagh, they were not only recognised as preservers and performers of the high culture of the court, but actively shaped the developments in Hindustani music and kathak dance styles. Their style of entertainment was widely imitated in other Indian court cities. They commanded great respect in the court and in society and association with them bestowed prestige on those who were invited to their salons for cultural soirees. It was not uncommon for the young sons of the nobility to be sent to the best known salons for instruction in etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature. They were artists who had to undergo rigorous training. Many of the musicians belonged to famous lineages and much of late 19th century Hindustani music was invented and transformed in these salons, to accommodate the new urban elite who filled the patronage vacuum in the colonial period. Courtesans were valued patrons of poets, scholars, holy men and most importantly talented musicians and dancers [Manuel 1987: 12-17; Sharar 1975: 192; Talwar Oldenburg 1984: 131-42; Kidwai 2004: 50].

The play tries to assert this creative aspect of the courtesans. According to Sharma "by asserting that courtesans are creative people I wanted to question the general notion that these women are 'public' women and available for all. These women

have command over language, music and dance.”³ Sharma emphasises how these women were trained in the art of conversation which is gradually becoming lost in society. The character of Azizun Nisa is portrayed as that of a very talented artiste. She has a deep commitment to art and considers herself a poet-lyricist and an artiste. She emphasises that one does not become a courtesan by just leaving home but stresses that a dancer has to undergo rigorous training. That is why in the play when a British official refers to her house as a brothel full of lust and sin, she feels very humiliated and reacts strongly to the official saying that “such accusations are baseless. I am not a prostitute. I am a dancer. I am an artiste. I do not wear the veil but I’m not a public woman. People in the city...acknowledge me as a courtesan, a poet, a lyricist. I’m not in the flesh trade” [Sharma 2005: 133].

The courtesans were professional and business women, making an independent life for themselves. They organised funds, paid people and arranged for travels. They owned property and paid taxes. Their names were mentioned in Lucknow city’s civic tax ledger of 1858-77. Some of the courtesans were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. Their names were also on lists of property (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the seize of Lucknow and the rebellion against colonial rule in 1857 [Talwar Oldenburg 1984: 145-80].

They ran full-fledged establishments where dancing girls had to be hired and trained, musicians to be arranged and many other arrangements to be made. Courtesans were usually part of a larger establishment run by a ‘chaudharayan’, or chief courtesan, an older woman who has retired to the position of manager after a successful career as a courtesan. Having acquired wealth and fame, such women were able to recruit and train women who came to them, along with the more talented daughters of the household. The chaudharayan always received a fixed proportion (approximately a third) of the earnings to maintain the apartments, pay to hire and train other dancing girls, and attract the musicians, chefs, and special servants that such establishments employed. The household had other functionaries. Doormen, watchmen, errand boys, tailors, palanquin-carriers and others

who – they lived in the lower floors of the house or in detached servant's quarters and were also often kinsmen – screened suspicious characters at the door, acted as protectors of the house, and spied on the activities of the police and medical departments [Talwar Oldenburg 1991]. Property passed from mother to daughters. The male children became the deprived gender and were entirely dependent on the mothers and sisters. When married, their wives looked after the household chores. It was the girls in whose education investments were made [Kidwai 2004: 50].

The courtesans were intelligent women unlike the notion that was held of them. They had to regularly deal with the local police and 'kotwals' in different ways, either through bribing or in their own innovative, ingenious ways. They knew where to fight and where not to and were conscious of their survival. They invented covert, non-confrontational and devious ways for their survival and gradually learnt to relate to or live in man's world. According to Sharma "running the kotha and organising the performance needs skills and operations at various levels. But people do not recognise their skills and feel as if they are sitting in 'bazaar'".⁴

IV

The advent of British power marked the erosion of the cultural power of the courtesan. British rule had marked the loss of the protection and patronage of royal courts for courtesans; they were their main patrons. Courtesans could practise their skills freely in the kingdom of Wajid Ali Shah. However, with the British takeover, even the king became a powerless prisoner in exile along with his influential courtiers. The British government overlooked the artistic and creative element of the kothas and equated them with brothels. The identity of the courtesans was adversely affected. They were targeted by the same medical laws (Britain's Contagious Disease Act of 1864) to control venereal diseases afflicting European soldiers along with prostitutes, which were implemented for the prostitutes in order to regulate, inspect and control them. The provisions of Britain's contagious Diseases Act of 1864 were incorporated into a comprehensive piece of legislation, Act XXII of 1864; it required the registration and periodic medical examination of prostitutes in all cantonment

cities of the Indian empire. It became imperative that the courtesans and prostitutes of Lucknow, along with those in the other 110 cantonments in India where European soldiers were stationed, be regulated, inspected, and controlled [Talwar Oldenburg 1991:28-33].

The collective impact of these regulations, the loss of court patronage and later the material penalties extracted from courtesans for their role in the 1857 rebellion were a severe blow to them and signalled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution. The British had perceived the courtesans as an integral part of the elite. In a campaign waged against them to reduce their influence, the new government assumed control over much of the prime real estate given to them by the Nawabs, and discredited the nobility who associated with them as dissolute and immoral. Yet, when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon, and decreed rules to make this possible. It became official policy to select the healthy and beautiful "specimens" from among the kotha women, and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience and health of the European soldiers. This not only dehumanised the profession, stripping it of its cultural function, but made sex cheap and easy for men while exposing women to venereal infection from the soldiers. Stripped of their privileges under the control of the colonial army, courtesans fought against this assault on their person, their property, and their "immorality", in other words, from then on down to the present day they struggle to retain their validity and some of the tangible benefits of a professional group [Talwar Oldenburg 1991:33].

According to Sharma,

That these women are treasure houses for culture and expressions are devalued, conveniently forgotten and consequently lost, and they are seen merely as entertainers and available for sex work. These are two distinct things. The kothas had music, dance and entertainment but the courtesans were not available for all. Their relationship was of choice. This has done a great damage to these women, their bodies, their identity and culture. Today in the common parlance the meaning of kotha is brothel. The dancing and singing community have to

struggle hard to fight against this identity and insist that they are singers and dancers by caste and not available for money.⁵

The anger of the courtesans against British rule can be seen in this context. But looking at their participation in the 1857 revolt merely from the point of such anger would be to overlook the courtesans' political consciousness and agency. They are not seen as political subjects and are even considered to have no values. Sharma's play has questioned such notions. She wants to stress that these women too had a conscience and values and knew where to compromise and where not to. Courtesans felt the same way about their conscience as soldiers with strong feelings for their homeland vis-à-vis the British raj did. The soldiers were faced with a conflict between their own culture and people and loyalty to the British from whom they were drawing their salary. Sharma highlights that the courtesans were also faced with such conflict. It was not an easy decision for them to participate in the revolt. Taking to bloodshed and war is never an easy decision. So for Azizun Nisa it was a moral and spiritual decision too. Sharma says:

There was a temptation to highlight in the play that the courtesans had lots of anger against the British and wanted to take revenge because of the cases of rape in British mehfils. This anger and revenge would have helped in building dramatic devices in the play but I restrained. I treated it at a different level. I felt that there was a level of rationality involved in courtesans' participation. Azizun Nisa's participation was a call of conscience and not a craving for personal gain or political power. A large section of the ruling class and landlords participated in the 1857 revolt because of their political and economic interests. Tantia Tope, Nana Saheb and Laxmi Bai, some of the main leaders, were from the ruling classes who were directly affected. To Laxmi Bai the issue was securing the throne for her son. But for Azizun Nisa there was no such personal interest. Azizun Nisa in that way did not have any connection with any big power or influential man. She was involved with Shamsuddin, a rebel sepoy, who was not a powerful man but has just 30 or 40 horses under him. So Azizun Nisa's stake does not seem to be personal. She did not participate for personal or immediately recognisable reasons. There seem to be other motivations than just immediate factors. Her stake seems to be that of conscience, more of a desire to transcend.⁶

The play highlights the political subjectivity of these women performers. Often a rich debate on political matters takes place between them in the play. In fact, courtesans were very

politically conscious. They were aware of contemporary politics and law, had connections among the local power elite and were also well informed about the history of the city. In their view, the British had deliberately muddled the truth about their kothas in order to denigrate Nawabi culture and to thus justify annexing the kingdom of Awadh in 1856 [Talwar Oldenburg 1991:33].

Thus by bringing the figure of the courtesan centrally into the political space, a space denied and invisibilised in nationalist discourse in its search for respectability, this article explores their public/political role. By foregrounding women such as Azizun Nisa, who is neither the "respectable" mother nor wife, the quintessential inspirational figures in the nationalist discourse, Sharma also disrupts and ruptures the dominant bourgeois nationalist discourse. It disrupts the trope of "mother India" that dominated anti-colonial (middle class) nationalist thought.

NOTES

- 1 Interview with Tripurari Sharma, May 25, 2005.
- 2 Interview with Tripurari Sharma.
- 3 Interview with Tripurari Sharma.
- 4 Interview with Tripurari Sharma.
- 5 Interview with Tripurari Sharma.
- 6 Ibid.

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Music and Society in North India: From the Mughals to the Mutiny

Jon Barlow, Lakshmi Subramanian

THE dramatically transformed political and social dynamics that emerged in the aftermath of the Mutiny of 1857 determined the circumstances in which Indo-Islamic Hindustani music – or north Indian classical music – had to survive and adapt to “the modern”. However, it was between 1707 and 1857 that its ethos, genres, aesthetic concerns and manner of performance came to be established. Although its primary elements, the ‘ragas’ and ‘talas’ were ancient [Prajnananda 1981; Gautam 1980], the synthesis of Indian and Islamicate streams that had begun in the 13th century matured in this interregnum. Older musical forms were compounded and refurbished and new forms, especially of instrumental music, were developed. While late 19th and 20th century musicians elaborated and reworked these forms – ‘khyal’, ‘thumri’ and the instrumental music of the sitar and sarode – in the context of a new and increasingly dominant metropolitan dispensation, it was in the period following Aurangzeb that the regional networks of princely patronage had emerged. Classical music, before and after the Mutiny, spread and survived the pressures of transition through these networks and these courts became the conduits for its passage into the world of modern urbanised India. The connection of musicians associated with the Gwalior court and with Maharashtrian students leading back to Pune and Bombay produced an important axis for khyal singing. ‘Dhrupad’ and instrumental music on the other hand found a fertile field in Calcutta where, from around the time of the Mutiny, the musicians in the retinue of the exiled Nawab Wajid Ali Shah interacted with the city’s educated, modernising ‘bhadralok’.

Hindustani classical music in the 19th century was defined by the ascent of khyal, especially the ‘gayaki’ of Niamat Khan

'Sadarang', which became the dominant creative vehicle for art music [Karnani 2005]. Most of its musical elements were derived from older religious, folk and theatrical musical traditions of India but its distinct, hybrid identity can be traced back to the performative traditions of the Persian court and the Indian Sufi 'khanaqah'. A remarkable feature in the narrative of Hindustani music right through this period was the central role played by the Seniah gharana [Miner 1997] of the Mughal court musician Mian Tansen and his descendants through his sons, especially Bilas Khan, and his daughter Saraswati. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, almost without exception, Seniah models [Dhar 1989] formed the canon and Seniah teachers taught those who achieved excellence in instrumental music. In the case of khyal singing, although it was a genre with a long history of development, its transition from being the leading musical form in the repertoire of the Chishti Sufis to becoming the dominant form of classical art music in secular performance was mediated through the nexus of the Niamat Khan (Seniah) and the Qawwal Bachche teaching lines. The Seniah gharana was associated with the 'dhrupad' genre of Gwalior, which became the canonical musicological model when the emperor Akbar (1556-1605) appointed a core of Gwalior musicians to his darbar. Mian Tansen attained the leading rank among them. His successors were responsible for making critical innovations to the Persian (or Kashmiri) 'sehtar' and its mode of playing that led to the development of the modern instrumental music of the sitar and sarode. The Qawwal Bachche, who formed the basis of the Gwalior khyal gharana in the early 19th century, were musicians in the teaching line of Amir Khusrau's Chistiah musical 'silsila'. In the early 18th century some of them had become followers of the gayaki of the Seniah Niamat Khan 'Sadarang', which had raised the universal standard for contemporary musicality. The music of these Qawwal-Bachche Qawwals precipitated the emergence of the modern khyal style in all its artistic, technical and musicological excellence.

For the greater part of the 18th and early 19th centuries, despite the devastation that tore north Indian society apart, the musical culture of northern India continued to move within an interlocking grid of courtly patronage, networks of Hindu devotional and Sufi mystical practices, and popular spaces of

secular and religious entertainment. The imperial city of Delhi occupied the centre of this grid and set standards in the arts and other cultural practices, although after the gruesome events of the second half of the 18th century its influence was reduced and its "centrality" became largely symbolic. The tragedy of Mughal political decline stood in curious contrast to manifestations of creative energy in the domain of music, even if some contemporaries preferred to see an excessive patronage of music as an expression of moral decay. Taking its cue from Herman Goetz's (1938) earlier formulations on cultural efflorescence in the 18th century, this paper attempts to synthesise existing historical work on the subject to locate the complex evolution of musical culture in northern India from the early 18th century up to 1857. It specifically focuses on the origins and development of those forms that became identified as mainstream classical Hindustani music in the 20th century.¹

MUSIC IN THE AGE OF CRISIS

The articulation of Delhi's musical culture went through several identifiable changes in the course of the 18th century, corresponding closely to shifts in court politics and the changing social fabric. A line of faineant emperors, a fractious nobility bent on self-aggrandisement, the depredations of a series of plundering warlords and a series of agrarian uprisings that strained the flagging resources of the empire, created an impossible situation with inevitable consequences. The distinguishing features of Mughal rule immediately following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 were bitterly contested wars of succession that convulsed the army and the nobility. Politicking at the imperial court and an emerging tendency on the part of the nobility to convert their official positions into permanent fiefs challenged what remained of imperial authority. The result was a rapid disintegration of the empire, with its provinces, or 'subas', breaking away. Compounding this rot in "the great time of troubles" were groups of powerful but eccentric outsiders, like the Bangash Afghans and the Rohillas, who were bent on carving out destinies for themselves.²

While the consequences of imperial Mughal decay were politically disastrous, the city of Delhi and its social fabric did

not immediately register a decline. Even as signs of imminent municipal collapse appeared in the first quarter of the 18th century – evident in the shoe sellers' riots of 1729 [Irvine 1989] – the city continued to expand with staggeringly wealthy merchants and the nobility investing in architecture and the arts. The havelis or mansions of the nobles and leading merchants became mini courts and centres of cultural patronage, especially of music and the 'sama' associated with the Sufi circles in the city. We get a telling sense of the extravagant preoccupations of Delhi's elites from the contemporary writer Mohammed Baksh Ashub, author of the *Tarikh i Shahahadat i Farukhsiyar was julus i Muhammad Shah*. Citing the example of Zafar Khan Roshan ud daulah who had "amassed more wealth than what Pharaoh had dreamed to possess" [Chenoy 1998], Ashub wrote of how Zafar Khan's house looked like a mountain of gold; how the walls and doors were lavishly gilded and decorated with costly tapestry and hangings of gold and the floors covered with carpets of the richest silk; how he went to the royal palace in costly state, always dressed in elegant, rich garments and attended by horsemen and servants, distributing money among the poor who thronged his way. Zafar Khan organised the ceremonies of Bara Wafat (the prophet's birthday) and the Urs of Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki on a grand scale, making them unusually spectacular and impressive by decorating streets and roads with bright lights. Once a week, Zafar Khan held a Majlis i Sama to which he invited mystics, saints, ulema and pious persons of the city. In a state of ecstasy he tore up his golden clothes and distributed the pieces among the singers, offering coins of gold and silver to them. When the music was over, the gathering was entertained with sumptuous meals served in gold and silver ware (*ibid*).

The account is telling in various ways, besides pointing to a sort of vulgarisation within Delhi's cultural practices. Musical patronage was central to the culture of Mughal India and was at once a court prerogative and simultaneously, integrally and intimately bound up with Sufi mystical devotion. The first half of the 18th century saw a further revival of the Chishti order, reorganised by Shaikh Kalim Ullah (1650-1729) and his successors, notably Shah Fakruddin, who made Delhi the centre of his activities and gave a renewed momentum to Chishti organisation.

Similar developments were evident in the Naqshbandi order under a series of remarkable leaders beginning with Shah Waliullah (1703-63), Mazhar Jan i Janan and Muhammad Badayuni. Satish Chandra (1986, pp 210-11) has suggested that there was a noticeable increase in the numbers of Urs (birthday) celebrations of Sufi saints in Delhi, a development that is recorded by Dargah Quli Khan in his *Muraqqa-e-Dehli*, written during his stay (1737-41) in the middle of the reign of Muhammad Shah [Shekhar and Chenoy 1996].

Dargah Quli Khan was especially eloquent in his notices of Sufi leaders who spurned court patronage and led reclusive lives. What emerges from his account is the multi-layered musical culture of Delhi implicit in the contrast between the scenes of entertainment sponsored by the nobility and the wealthy, and the devotional pursuit of sublime experience practised in the Sufi Khanqahs (*ibid*, pp 36; 38-39, 45). Delhi's status as the cultural capital of music did not long survive Muhammad Shah (1719-48). By the early 19th century the musical situation was somewhat similar to that of the 15th century, when music flourished in a number of regional centres, each with its own ethos. Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of Delhi remained important even as the regional courts became prominent. All of them without exception were supplied with an outflow of musicians from the imperial capital.

Contemporary observers tended to see the cultural efflorescence of Delhi in the early 18th century as symptomatic of a demoralised elite sinking into a quagmire of extreme hedonism. Dargah Quli Khan's account of the raunchy exploits of Delhi noblemen certainly warrants such a reading. Artists and musicians had never had it better; he quoted a contemporary couplet "with betel in their mouths and bodies beautifully dressed, the artists play the Dholak or the Sitar and are coquettish and cockish in the security of their affluence". This description evidently reflected a popular level of musical entertainment not to be mistaken with the high art music patronised by the Mughal court and cultivated by the KALAWANTS. Dargah Quli Khan's Delhi had a very different atmosphere to that suggested in Nawab Faqirullah Saif Khan's *Ragadarpana* written sixty years earlier [Sarmadee 1996]. The contrast between the dignified, dhrupad dominated and darbar centric tone of the *Ragadarpana*

and the louche, even streetwise, ambience of the *Muraqqa-i-Dehli*'s performative world, despite the presence of Niamat Khan and other remarkable musicians, is striking. Muhammad Shah's reign is generally seen as the period in which dhrupad began to be displaced from its central position. This appears to have been the result of a decline in kalawant fortunes, mirroring the changes at the imperial centre, and a simultaneous resurgence of Sufism and the music associated with it.

The first manifestation of trouble for the kalawants appears with Aurangzeb's famous proscription of music in 1667. Katherine Butler Brown's (2006) recently published article demonstrates how Aurangzeb's action was more in the nature of a withdrawal of patronage when the emperor, for personal reasons to do with grief and pious austerity, decided to abjure the enjoyment of music. However, the absence of substantial court employment lasted more than 30 years and precipitated a professional crisis among the elite musicians of the north, driving them to seek alternative patronage and to rethink professional/performative strategies. During this period an intense interest in music, reflected in a proliferation of musicological texts appears to have grown among the elite of Delhi that coincided with a resurgence of the Chishti and other liberal Sufi sects. It also saw kalawant musicians, most of whom were recent converts to Islam through the agency of Sufi saints, beginning to absorb the music and musical repertoire of the Qawwals in a more proactive manner.³

Aurangzeb's death in 1707 after a series of accessions and assassinations was followed by the bizarre episode of Jahandar Shah's rule with Lal Kunwar, his concubine and short-term wife (1712-13) that constituted an extraordinary and well-documented episode in the convulsive decline of the Mughals. The courtesan Lal Kunwar was a descendant of Tansen according to contemporary sources [Irvine 1989; Chandra 1986] and became the favourite concubine of Aurangzeb's grandson Jahandar Shah, whom she twisted around her little finger, becoming his queen with the title of Imtiaz Mahal. Together they proceeded to scandalise the solid citizens of Delhi with a series of outrageous pranks – publicly bathing naked in the Suraj Kund in order to conceive a son and wandering about the city in drunken revels, mindless of imperial etiquette. Contemporary

chroniclers lamented the wilful promotion of her siblings, including Niamat Khan (later famous as ‘Sadarang’), to high positions in the court and how her caprice frequently persuaded the emperor to act against his better judgment [Irvine 1989]. After a year of mismanagement Jahandar Shah was assassinated and Lal Kunwar pensioned off. This episode⁴ damaged relations between the Mughal administrative and military elite and the kalawant musical community, which was in any case held in low esteem by the orthodox Muslim community and the ulema.

The next episode of transition was the successful entry of “cutting edge” khyal into the court of Muhammad Shah. Niamat Khan, when ordered by the Badshah to accompany other singers on his ‘been’, refused out of self-respect and consequently had to leave the court. Adopting the ‘takhullus’, ‘Sadarang’, composed a series of brilliant ‘bandish’ (compositions) in the khyal style, transformed through his genius and grounding in the musicology of ‘dhrupad’, into a compelling new mould. These songs became enormously popular and his romantic texts, which combined the names of the emperor and the composer in the formula “Muhammad Shah Sadarangile”, cast Muhammad Shah in the role of a hero-lover. On discovering that the exiled Niamat Khan was the source of these pleasing songs, the emperor recalled him to the court and acceded to his request that his been-playing be given equal status with dhrupad singing [T J Singh 1995; Miner 1997]. This meant that he could, hereafter, sit and play solo been in the imperial presence. It also marked the entry of khyal, albeit via the zenana, into the domain of court music, an important step on its route to becoming the dominant secular form.

EVOLUTION ●F MUSIC IN N●RTH INDIA: A HIST●RICAL ●VERVIEW

Early orientalist historians conceived of Indian music as coming down in a continuous stream from Vedic times until the early medieval period when the music of Islamic societies, under the patronage of Muslim warlords, made a rude inroad into traditional ‘marga’ practice and corrupted its purity. Others later claimed that while some alien tunes, instruments and

terminology were imported with the conquering culture, indigenous music was able to absorb these without losing its identity and that even those genres supposed to be derived from Persian models are in fact local forms. Neither of these views is satisfactory. While many elements in the collection of ragas, talas and practices that constitute classical Indian music have ancient origins in the Vedic and later Sanskritik culture, it is generally accepted that from about the 6th century a number of major decisive changes began to take place. Most significant was the growth of a repertoire of 'deshi' ragas and the gradual displacement of the 'grama-murchana' system of melodic classification [Prajananda 1981; Brihaspati 1934; Gautam 1980]. This laid the base for the shift to a universal tonic, 'sa', which characterises Hindustani music, and the need for a revised taxonomy of musical objects.

Musical influence from the Islamic world must have been felt in India with the Arab invasion of Sind but from the 13th century a much richer melange of musical elements began to appear in north India in the wake of the Mongol depredations to the west. The arrival of Sufis from Persianised central Asia brought an influx of musicians with Turkoman and Persian instruments, tunes and song forms and a positive will to engage with Indian music and languages [Brihaspati 1934]. Hindi was considered by the Chishti Sheikhs to be capable of poetically expressing subtle metaphysical ideas more directly than Persian, and to be more suited to song. The Sufis were attracted to Yoga practices and, identifying with the metaphorical themes of bhakti, became enthusiastic patrons of Hindu music. This inclusive devotional sociability, and its preoccupation with music, lay at the core of the Hindustani ethos and lasted till the early 20th century.

The pre-eminent musical personality in the early networks of cultural interaction was Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), the son of a Turkish nobleman and an Indian mother. He was equally famous as a "luminous presence" in a series of Delhi darbars (most notably that of Sultan Ala'uddin Khilji), and as the beloved disciple of one of the most revered and famous of all Sufi saints, Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. Popular tradition credits Khusrau with the founding of the Hindustani musical tradition. He is believed to have mastered Indian music through the agency of Gopal Nayak (supposedly the greatest Indian musical

authority of the period) who, according to legend, came to Delhi, and appeared at the court of Ala'uddin Khilji (1296-1316). The legend of Amir Khusrau's engagement with Gopal Nayak has a deep resonance in the imaginary reconciliation of the confrontation of indigenous Indian musical practice with the Islamic culture that was to dominate the subcontinent for centuries to follow [T J Singh 1995; Ansari 1975].

Magical legend remembers Amir Khusrau as having taught his new syncretic music to two disciples, Samat and Nigar, the one deaf – the other dumb, at the command of his 'pir', Nizamuddin Auliya, to thereby manifest the compassionate power and grace of God. Legend says they established the lineage of the 'Qawwal Bachche' [Miner 1997; Roy Chowdhury undated], which remained closely connected to the Nizami Chishti Sufi silsila and ultimately left to the development of 19th century khyal. Nizamuddin Auliya's following, with its spiritual base at his dargah in Delhi, emerged as a major site of musical patronage, practice, accumulation and integration, to which musicians from all over India were attracted in the following centuries. The Chishti centres of Ajmer, Multan, Ajodhan, Delhi, Jaunpur, Bijapur and various others functioned as a geographical network for the circulation of musical as well as mystical, philosophical and literary culture.

According to popular tradition, Amir Khusrau also invented a variety of musical genres like the 'qaul', 'qalbana', ghazal, 'tarana', 'naqsh-o-gul' and khyal, and instruments such as the Indian sitar and tabla [Singh 1995: 120-23]. These genres were actually derived from the conventional sequence of compositional forms in the contemporary Persian courts' musical repertoire [Farmer 1957] which Khusrau integrated and naturalised through the use of indigenous languages and tunes. He participated in a larger inter-related Islamic musical world that spanned from Spain to India and the borders of China and is also credited with the introduction of a new system of classification based on the Persian 'maqam', that accommodated both Arabo-Persian tunes and the wealth of deshi ragas. The enormous success of the Chishti Sufis in spreading their indigenised form of Islamic devotion in tandem with an inclusive musical culture meant that this sort of classification, which became known as the 'sansthan' or 'thaat' system in the north, was adopted even in southern

India where it was known as the 'melakarta' [Brihaspati 1934]. If he was in some way responsible for this development, it would have been quite consistent with the sort of intellectual engagement with musical theory that was current among his Persian and Arab contemporaries.

The musical culture that Khusrau's genius developed was a seamless synthesis of Indo-Islamic elements, musical and linguistic, that fed into the devotional and court cultural practices of medieval India. However Persian and Turkomani music appears to have retained pride of place at court until the Mughal court registered a critical moment in the development of Indian music when Akbar's 'darbar' demonstrated a shift in imperial taste with its preferential patronage of the indigenous 'dhrupad'. The cultivation of classical Indian song-forms by pre-Mughal regional powers like Jaunpur (1398-1480), Gwalior (1480-1520) and Bijapur (1489-1686) constituted rich inputs in terms of musicology and practice and contributed to a triumph of indigenous musical form at the Mughal centre [Wade 1998: 160-83]. The courts of Hussein Shirqi of Jaunpur⁵ and Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior were especially important in the evolution of "classical" musical forms. Under Raja Man Singh dhrupad had acquired a cohesive form characterised by a four-part structure; the four 'tuks', 'sthai', 'antara', 'bhog' and 'abhog'. The form was perfected by a collaboration of leading indigenous musicians gathered together in Gwalior by Raja Man Singh [Miner 1997: 75]. The Jaunpur court on the other hand had participated in the early evolution of the khyal genre⁶ when the local 'Cutkala' form of traditional Indian art song was interwoven with the 'ravish' (genres, repertoire and style) of Amir Khusrau, which had come to Jaunpur with the Chisti pirs of the Sultan Hussein Shirqi.

Hindustani music, distinguished by the primacy of ragas, use of regional dialects, and by the integration of Indo-Islamic elements, matured under the Imperial Mughal patronage. It drew from a cosmopolitan repertoire of musical forms of Arab, Persian and Khurasani music, the songs of the Qawwals – qaul, qalbana, ghazal, tarana, etc, along with classical dhrupad, Hindu temple and devotional music and an endless variety of itinerant and regional music, seasonal folk-songs and so on. These had evolved in networks of shared performative spaces

with long histories of musical interaction and had been refined and re-composed in several major locations or nets of creative sociability. Among these, the Chishti Sufi silsila, the Vaishnav ‘Vallabhacarya Sampradaya’ and the Sikh congregation, beginning with Guru Nanak, were especially important in integrating musical ideas and practices [Delvoye 1997; Sarmadee 1996; pp (vi and vii)].

The interconnectedness of musical practices was reflected in the organisation of the musical profession that clearly straddled the domains of the court and the dargah. Faqirullah Nawab Saif Khan’s 17th century treatise, the *Tarjuma I Manakutuhala*, and *Raga Darpan* identify a hierarchy among the ‘ustads’ or professional class of musicians as well as among the amateurs [Sarmadee 1996: xxxviii]. Kalawants and Baykars occupied the most eminent position, followed by Qawwals, Dhadhis and so on, but all of them according to Faqirullah belonged to Sufi silsilas and “abided by a system of music which had by then assimilated every incoming influence, still had its infrastructure intact”. The various categories of musicians (*ibid*, pp 195, 197, 199-211) – kalawants (dhrupadiyahs), Dhadhis (especially associated with the epic song form ‘kabbit’), Qawwals (specialists in qaul, tarana and khyal) goindahs and so on, were not static caste categories but changed over time. The dominance of the dhrupad in court did not preclude the circulation of other genres. The qawwali repertoire – the qaul, qalbana and tarana and so on were widely sung in the Sufi gatherings, and khyal, according to Allyn Miner (1997), the most widespread form of the time, was held in high musical regard in the 18th century (pp 845).

In recording the processes of transformation of the khyal into the dominant genre it is easy to overlook the continuing importance of the dhrupad as the cornerstone of raga music. Many of the musicians who facilitated the success of the modern secular khyal were themselves dhrupadiyahs and dhrupad remained, conventionally, the dominant genre of most court music through to the early 20th century. Interacting with the Qawwal Bachches in a complex web of social relations, they applied the musical canons of the dhrupad in the articulation of the khyal, and maintained a special and close relationship with the Sufis, obtaining customary rights to perform at the dargah of Nizamuddin Aulia on occasions such as his Urs. In the

19th century, these families became the Agra, Khurja, Hapur, Secunderabad and Atrauli gharanas of khyal following the emergence of the Gwalior gharana. It is significant that leading khyalists of the late 19th and 20th centuries were by and large those dhrupadiyahs who emerged as authentic sources of khyal teaching when the Qawwal Bachches, who had been the traditional exponents of pre-modern khyal, had disappeared from the musical world.

In instrumental music, as in vocal music, the advent of the Muslims brought about profound and far-reaching changes. Little is known with any certainty about the indigenous instrumental music current in north India at the time of Amir Khusrau. He mentions the 'alawan', a kind of been, as being the only instrument the (Hindu) kalawants could play well [Sarmadee 2004]. Stick zithers of various kinds (the been family including the 'kinnari', the 'jantar', the 'tuila' and the early been) appear to have been common throughout India and some sort of long necked lutes are attested to in 14th and 15th century temple sculptures from the south and from Java, where quite an advanced form of been with two large gourds and frets is also commonly found. There is little or no evidence of short-necked lutes and the harps which abounded in ancient India.

Muslim musicians brought with them Persian and Khurasani instruments; the 'chang' – a harp/zither, the 'rabab' and 'barbat', respectively skin-covered and wooden-topped lutes, the 'tambur' – the long-necked lute with wooden sound-board that would later be hybridised with the been to become the Indian tanpura. They had various forms of fiddles including a bowed rabab, a prototype of the early sarengi. Both cultures of course had flutes and oboes (shehnai, etc), but stringed instruments were more prominent in the art music of the Indo-Islamic world. In the domain of percussion the Muslims brought their 'duffs' and 'tabl' (and possibly the dholak), while the Hindus had their 'mridangam', 'ghatam' and others. There is no mention of the Persian 'setar' in the literature of the Muslim era but it would seem to have been a common instrument in Kashmir from perhaps the 15th century, where along with the Afghani style of 'rabab', it was an important component of 'sufiana mausiqi' ensembles. The Afghani rabab

was also common among Afghan warriors who played anthems and folk songs on it.

This repertoire of musical instruments seems to have held sway from the 13th to the 17th century. Under the Mughals however, we see a growing Indianisation of court music represented in miniature painting in the depiction of musical instruments [Wade 1998, pp 160-83]. Mian Tansen passed on to his descendants a dhrupad informed conception of playing the rabab and his son-in-law, the beenkar Mishri Singh, aka Naubat Khan, set a new course for the been. Having absorbed the instruments and methodological and melodic offerings that had immigrated into India from the Islamic world with the Sufis, the revitalised Hindustani music, with its own instruments, became the music of the Mughal darbar.

Faqirullah's description [Sarmadee 1996: 191] of the 'soz khyal' invented by the Sufi Sheikh Baha'uddin Barnawi is an important pointer to the hybridity that characterised Hindustani music in Mughal India. Sheikh Baha'uddin, whose ancestors had been pirs to the Jaunpur Sultans, was the pre-eminent Sufi musician and patron of the 'khusravi silsila' in the Delhi region in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. A versatile singer and rabab player, he devised a complex new stringed instrument, the soz khyal which enjoyed a certain vogue and presented a performance of it played by one of his disciples, to Shah Jehan. It may well have survived as a venerated curiosity and stimulated later experimentation with instruments. The soz-khyal is the first instance we have of a deliberate invention of a new instrument; later we have the "surbahar" and the surchain [McNeil 2004; Miner 1997].

SADARANG: TOWARDS A MODERN ART MUSIC

The extraordinary achievements of Niamat Khan 'Sadarang' and his nephew Firoze Khan, in the early 18th century were a turning point in the development of vocal music and the beginning of a new conception of instrumental music that would lead to a range of hybrid instruments integrating dhrupad and khyal styles. The sitar, sarode, surbahar, sursringar, modern sarengi and even the tabla are all expressions of this process. (The sitar, first mentioned in the *Muraqqa-i-Dehli*, was

found across north India, from the Punjab to Bengal, by the end of the 18th century.⁷ The Seniahs transformed it into a sort of been.) The musicological centrality of the Dhrupad and the acoustic primacy of the been ‘ang’, were essential to Niamat Khan’s approach towards the perfection and refinement of the khyal. He revolutionised the faster tempo songs with a series of brilliant fusions of raga and rhythm and developed a slower and grander form of khyal, known as ‘bara khyal’. This was set in longer cycles and performed in slow medium tempo that provided a leisurely framework in which a detailed improvisatory treatment of the raga became possible, while retaining the textual identity of the composition. Similarly, he enhanced the technique of the been, bridging the space between the Dhrupad, instrumental music and khyal. The description of his music in the *Muraqqa* makes it clear that he not only played the been superbly, but in a way that had not been heard before enrapturing and fascinating his listeners [Shekhar and Chenoy 1996: 75, 96]. Dargah Kuli Khan claims that there was never a beenkar like him before and indeed Niamat Khan is credited with having raised the Bin to the status of a solo instrument (*ibid*, pp 76-77).

It is likely that Niamat Khan began a process of enlarging instruments, adding strings and widening the frets to permit more elaborate sliding tonal figures that marked the evolution of the been-sitar family of instruments over the subsequent two centuries. In any event, something in the way of a revolution in instrumental music was going on in his time and in his immediate family. His brother Khusrav Khan is described, in the *Muraqqa-i-Dehli*, as having a unique aptitude with all manner of musical instruments. His nephew Feroze Khan, better known as ‘adarang’, mastered the sitar, developed a new way of playing it, and invented a style of composition based on the new music. Technically this involved replacing the gut frets with metal, like those used on the been, permitting long sliding notes or ‘meend’ to be produced by deflecting the strings across the fret. Subsequent alterations in tuning with heavier strings and correspondingly larger structural forms, gave the been the surbahar and surringar a deep sustained resonance that could convey the calm, reflective dignity of the dhrupad ang [Miner 1997; McNeil 2004]. These changes matured in a transformed

social setting when music spilt over into a number of regional centres and courts.

■ DELHI BETWEEN EMPIRES: MUSIC IN SEARCH OF NEW PATRONS

With the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739, the crisis of Mughal decline became all too clear. Delhi was subjected to unprecedented violence and the moral bankruptcy of the Mughal court lay exposed. The effects of political change on Delhi's traditional culture were severe. By 1761, when the fateful clash between the Marathas and Afghans had been decided on the plains of Panipat, the fate of the emperor was in the hands of self-aggrandising nobles. Delhi became an empty city, desolate and bankrupt and in no condition to sustain the older cultural fabric. Raiding armies produced a state of intermittent siege and Delhi was, as the poet Mir observed, "little more than a wilderness, which every six months was laid desolate afresh" [Russel and Alam 1968: 35]. Mir, like so many artists, left Delhi in search of new patrons. While acknowledging Delhi as the ultimate arbiter of standards, they realised that the city was no longer in a position to sustain them.

Around the last quarter of the 18th century large numbers of musicians left Delhi for the burgeoning regional courts, the most notable being Lucknow in the independent kingdom of Awadh, which under Asaf ud daulah's reign (1775-1797) "began to surpass even that of the emperor in Delhi" in wealth and magnificence. The Nawabs Shujadaulah (1754-75) and Asaf ud daulah patronised the arts in a big way, attracting prominent Delhi artists such as Jani and Ghulam Rasul (khyal singers) and the celebrated instrumentalists Chajju Khan and Jivan Khan – dhrupadiah and rababiah. All manner of performers flocked to Lucknow and the court soon became a celebrated centre of musical entertainment [Miner 1997: 97].⁸ Another important destination was Jaipur, with which the enigmatic composer 'Manarang', famous for his khyals and 'dadras' in the dhrupad manner, was associated in this period. The founder of the kingdom, Sawai Jaisingh (1727-1743) was favourably disposed to music and scholarship and by the late 19th century its 'gunjankhana' boasted a host of great musicians, especially

instrumentalists. Gwalior emerged as an outstanding centre for khyal after its ruler Daulat Rao Sindhia (1794-1827) attached the vocalists Bade Muhammad Khan and Qadir Baqsh and his sons Haddu and Hassu Khan to the court [Wade 1985, pp 37-41].

Smaller regional courts such as Benaras, Betiah, Rewa, Darbhanga and Banda also held out important opportunities for musicians on the move – an indication of the importance music and its patronage held for the cultural politics and profile of indigenous kingdoms. In the politically disempowered indigenous states, the pleasures of listening to elevated music combined aesthetic enjoyment with religious identification and considerations of ritual status and honour. In such a curiously charged atmosphere, the Awadh sovereign Wajid Ali Shah's (regnal dates 1847-56) obsessive engagement with music and poetry, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, becomes easier to comprehend.

Other sites of patronage, especially for instrumental music, were the Rohilla and Bangash centres, Rampur, Farruqabad, Bulandshahr, etc, that drew musicians from Delhi and enjoyed artistic connections with other regional courts like Lucknow. Nathu Khan, father of Ghulam Raza Khan, the celebrated and notorious musician of Lucknow, held an official position in Rampur between 1822 and 1840, while Ghulam Raza Khan's son, Ali Raza, spent time in Patna after the Mutiny [Miner 1997: 104-109, 112-13]. In fact what is clear from the fragmented narratives we have of the musicians on the move, is that an extremely mobile and peripatetic community deployed connections of kin, patronage and skill to find a niche in courtly culture and presumably in Sufi musical circles as well.

The relocation of music hardly interfered with the experimenting tendency that had been set in motion. Developments in vocal and instrumental music suggest that regional centres like Rohilkhand and Lucknow sustained a series of important artistic innovations. Moreover Delhi remained a centre for the sitar and Masit Khan (1750-1820), a celebrated beenkar who is especially important for his slow-tempo sitar compositions, is thought to have resided there⁹ (*ibid*, pp 93-94). The capital city still had well known Qawwal teachers, whom orientalised Europeans, like Antoine Polier, employed as teachers

[Alam and Alavi 2001]. Tanras Khan the great khyaliah of Bahadur Shah Zafar's darbar dominated the musical life of the city up to the Mutiny.

This is not to deny that the exodus of so many important musicians depleted Delhi's musical culture. The burgeoning of bazaar – nautch entertainment and the emergence of the dance thumri was widely seen as a marker of decline. We have somewhat miserable depictions of dance and musical entertainment in connection with the decaying Mughal aristocracy of the early 19th century. William Sleeman was especially savage in condemning Mughal princes like Mirza Jahangir, the favourite son of Emperor Akbar II. His descriptions of similar proclivities on the part of the Awadh ruler and of the intrigues of court musicians paint a picture of tawdry entertainment [Sleeman 1858] dominated by courtesans, that is in stark contrast to the high art music associated with the Mughal court. While this representation was biased and informed by British imperial designs on the court of Lucknow, it is important to consider how the shift in the spatial relocation of music, disconnected from its religious and imperial social context, to the 'kotahs' of Lucknow and the cantonments of Delhi, transformed the content of Indian music between the late 18th and mid-19th century. The Mutiny of 1857 and its aftermath put a seal to the changes and north Indian music had, to eventually, adapt to an even more profound and disruptive series of transitions through the phases of metropolitan and cosmopolitan modernity.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE MUTINY: THE EMERGENCE OF GHARANAS AND A NEW SETTING FOR HINDUSTANI MUSIC

The emergence of the gharanas around the end of the 19th century reflected the complexities of the sociological transition and transformation that music underwent before and after the Mutiny, culminating in the shift of the centre of Hindustani musical culture from central north India to the metropolitan centres of Calcutta and Bombay. Moving between various courts, musicians were often at loggerheads, competing for patronage and reluctant to share their musical resources outside their family circle. The term

gharana, derived from 'ghar' referred both to a legitimate line of transmission and its artistic content and character.

The traceable line of the Gwalior gayaki, which appears to have been the reference point from which other gharanas were defined, begins with the Qawwal Bachche singer Ghulam Rasool, son of Taj Khan Qawwal [mentioned in the *Muraqqa*, Shekhar and Chenoy 1996:78] and a follower of Sadarang's gayaki (it is quite likely that he was a direct student of Sadarang). Ghulam Rasool moved between Delhi and Lucknow and performed in the court of Asafudaula (1775-97). His widowed sister had two talented sons known as Shakkar and Makkhan whom she persuaded Ghulam Rasool to teach.¹⁰ The brothers developed a rivalry. Shakkar's son, Bade Muhammad Khan emerged as a singer of extraordinary, virtuosic abilities and was appointed as a musician in the court of Gwalior. Makkhan had two sons, Natthan and Pir Baqsh who also became attached to the court of Daulat Rao Sindhia and Pir Baqsh's son Qadir Baqsh had three sons Haddu, Hassu and Nathu Khan who were the founders of the Gwalior gharana.¹¹ A dramatic foundation legend of the gharana reveals the interplay of royal favouritism with familial jealousy. According to legend Bade Mohammad Khan was frightened and jealous of Qadir Baqsh and poisoned him. Moreover, he would not permit the young Haddu and Hassu to even hear his music. When Daulat Rao Sindhia, who was the patron of Bade Mohammad Khan, died, his son Jankoji Rao Sindhia persuaded their grandfather, the ageing Pir Baqsh to teach Haddu and Hassu so they could avenge their father's death and become the pre-eminent singers of the Gwalior darbar. In an episode redolent of Amir Khusrau's encounter with Gopal Nayak, Pir Baqsh persuaded Jankoji that in order to defeat Bade Mohammed Khan in musical combat, they should first secretly hear him perform. True to archetype they hid beneath the throne, heard Bade Muhammad's music and were able to master the intricate 'tanas' for which he was famous. In a competition arranged by Raja Jankoji Rao, Bade Mohammed Khan was duly defeated by his junior cousins. In a huff he left Gwalior and lived out his days in the court of Rewa. He did however have his revenge when in another round of competition he challenged Haddu Khan with a 'kharak bijli tana' (a strong lightning tana). Trying to duplicate

these ferocious patterns, the unfortunate Haddu Khan broke a rib, punctured his lung and died [Wade 1985, pp 40; T J Singh 1995, pp 270-73]. Whatever the truth may have been, the die was cast. Haddu and Hassu and their brother Natthan Khan, who certainly were among the leading singers of their day, eventually became the point of reference for numerous Maharashtrian students who identified themselves as followers of the Gwalior gharana and extolled their teachers as the true exponents of the "authentic" khyal gayaki.

Most of the acknowledged 19th century gharanas had their own links with Qawwal Bachche of Sadarang's gayaki line. The Sahaswan gharana began with Inayat Hussain Khan, the son-in-law of Haddu Khan. The founders of the Patiala Gharana studied with Tanras Khan (Qawwal Bachche) of Delhi, Haddu Khan of Gwalior, and Mubarak Ali, the son of Bade Muhammad Khan. The Agra gharana locates its beginning as khylalias with Gagge Khuda Baksh (1800-60) who turned to Natthan Khan of the Gwalior Qawwal Bachche for vocal training and ended up acquiring an impressive repertoire of his khyal bandishes [Singh 1995: 273-80, 293-95, 299-301]. There is a marked paucity of information about gharanas like Khurja and Hapur. They were dhrupad/kalawant lines with Qawwal Bachche connections, but when and how they took up khyal is not clear. Kubdjé Mohammad Baksh of Hapur (late 18th century – early 19th century) was the guru of Mian Achpal, who was in turn the guru of Tanras Khan, the great khyliah of Bahadur Shah Zafar's Delhi durbar. The Khurja musicians¹² had some connections with Rampur in the 18th century, and possibly with Feroze Khan 'Adarang', who had relocated from Delhi to Rampur around the 1760s. Khurja's greatest exponent, who became a musician of all India repute was Mian Zahur Baksh 'Ramdas', a brilliant singer-composer who travelled and taught widely. We have an account of him teaching esoteric aspects of voice production and breath control to the important south Indian musician, Ghanam Krishna Iyer.¹³ Thus, virtually all the existing lineages of khyal registered a significant initiation through some connection with the Qawwal Bachche line.

In reflecting on the 19th century story of musical dissemination, one is struck by the creative dominance of the Seniah family. From the first quarter of the 18th century through to the

Mutiny, the sitar enjoyed great vogue and was used widely to accompany nautch. Its development into the “classical” sitar began with Feroz Khan ‘Adaranga’, whose deep engagement with the khyl gayaki is evident in the pioneering ‘Firozhkhanī’ gats he composed. Another critical innovation in sitar playing was made by his son Masit Khan, who devised the form of composition and development (or ‘gatkari’) that became known as the ‘masitkhani baj’. Whereas Feroz Khan’s gats were close to the faster, more rhythmic, tarana and ‘chhote’ khyl, Masit Khan produced a form of playing that incorporated the dignified virtues of Sadaranga’s bada khyals. A branch of Seniah sitar playing settled in Jaipur, where Rahim Sen and his son Amrit Sen (born 1814), the greatest sitarist of the 19th century, attained unmatched refinement and virtuosity in handling the instrument.

Masit Khan’s son Umrao Khan – the premier beenkar of his time – became one of the great teachers of the 19th century, and several lines of sarodials and sitarists had their initial Seni ‘talim’ from him, including Ghulam Ali Bandagi (the ancestor of Hafiz Ali Khan and his son, the famous contemporary sarodiah Amjad Ali) and Inayet Khan, the doyen of Shahjehanpur gharana. The professional locations of both father and son are uncertain, but they moved around a lot in a very disturbed world. Around 1825 Umrao Khan devised a giant sitar for his shagird, Ghulam Muhammad, that would play alaap like the been, and soon developed into a magnificent instrument, the surbahar, which was taken up by many musicians including Imdad Khan, the great grandfather of the 20th century sitar maestro Vilayet Khan. Umrao Khan’s son Amir Khan, was employed in the Rampur darbar and taught the sarodiah Fida Hussein Khan, one of the most acclaimed musicians of India at the turn of the 20th century. Amir Khan was the father of the beenkar Wazir Khan, another important teacher and one of the main sources for Pandit V N Bhatkande in his prodigious work of collecting and publishing the music of north India. Wazir Khan became the ‘khas ustad’ of Allaudin Khan and Hafiz Ali Khan, the two great sarodials of the first half of the 20th century [ibid, pp 135-36; Singh T J 1997, pp 175, pp 462-63].

Senials had also overseen the transformation of the Afghani rabab into the modern sarod [Mcneil 2004]. The Afghani rabab,

extremely popular among Pathans of Rohilkhand and Rampur, used gut strings over a wooden fingerboard with gut frets tied around. It had a long and narrow skin covered drum and was carved from light mulberry wood. Sharing common features with the Indian rabab, its tone was weaker and lacked "sustain" (a voice-like continuity of sound after a stroke on the string), though this was partly compensated for by a complement of sympathetic strings that added sweetness/mood to its sound. Its evolution, into an instrument that could emulate qualities of the been and the Indian rabab, began when the dhrupad rabab playing descendants of Tansen's son Bilas Khan invented the sursingar, around the same time as the surbahar appeared. Jafar Khan and Piya Khan were the leading rababiahhs of the early 19th century. During a monsoon in Benaras, Jafar Khan found that his rabab could not answer the music of his cousin Nirmal Shah's been, because the goatskin soundboard had become limp in the humidity. He took time off and made a rabab with a wooden top to which he fitted a steel fingerboard, steel strings and a been-like 'jovari' bridge¹⁴ and with this innovation, he was able to compete effectively with the been. The Sursringar, enjoyed a vogue throughout the 19th century, and its steel plate and metal strings were the technological basis for the modern Sarod. Pyar Khan's son Basat Khan, a prominent ustad in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, relocated with him to Calcutta in 1856, just before the Mutiny. Accompanying Basat Khan was his shagird, the Afghan sarodiah Niamatullah Khan, who is thought to have been the first to fix a steel plate and metal strings on his Afghani rabab (also called a sarode) at the behest of his ustad. He probably did this around 1840, or perhaps earlier, and other sarodiahs were soon doing the same. This new instrument, like the transformed sitar, adapted over time with the evolving music. Eventually, as the Seni family disappeared, the sitar and sarod became the dominant instruments in the north Indian music repertoire.

CONCLUSION

Evidently the dynamics of transition politics in the 18th and 19th centuries did not entirely undermine the patronage basis of Hindustani music, even if it resulted in its spatial dispersion.

As musicians moved out from Delhi in search of support, they found themselves interacting with provincial, local cultures. The regional rulers looked back to Mughal Delhi for a cultural model and sought out musicians who embodied its accomplishments and traditions and their kingdoms collectively produced a fresh field of circulation for musicians and for musical creativity. This is illustrated by the case of the rabab-playing sarodiah in Rampur forming connections with Senia musicians; of the Senia sitarists finding a conducive reception in Rajput courts where the been had a long tradition; and of Gwalior, where the khayal found a courtly location from which it spread just as the dhrupad had 300 years before. In Lucknow Mian Shori, aka Jani Rasool took 'tappa' to new heights (late 18th century); Ghulam Raza developed a bright, light classical genre of sitar gats (mid 19th century) and khayal-like thumris were developed for Kathak dance. Benaras also became an important centre for dhrupad and instrumental music in the late 18th century and a number of other, smaller courts were important in the circulation of musicians and ideas. Rewa, whose Rajas were themselves musicians and patrons; Banda, the home of Kudau Singh¹⁵ [Singh 1997: 300] the great doyen of Pakhawaj, and of the surbahar player Ghulam Muhammad; Betiah, whose Rajas were 'Kali bhaktas' and composers of dhrupads in her honour were other centres. In Delhi the tabla evolved and entered the classical fold as an accompaniment to khayal and was later elaborated in various local styles with special preoccupations – dance in Lucknow and slow 'purab ang' thumri in Benaras. Other principalities that participated in this wave of patronage and interaction included Bishnupur, Darbhanga, Alwar, Jhajhar, Baroda, Indore Thaunk, Patiala, the Nepal of the Ranas and so on. In most of these manifestations, we find the musicological talim and penchant for creative innovation of the Seniahs at the cutting edge. This post-Mughal circulation precipitated contemporary classical music that then drifted to the metropolises.

How did the Mutiny of 1857 transform the musical scene? There is no doubt that it sounded the final death knell for Mughal Delhi and ushered in far-reaching changes. For the next 90 years of British rule, the 'sarkar' did not extend any

significant patronage to traditional music. Even before the cataclysmic event, music as part of an older court culture had dispersed to other centres. Those that sided with the Company in their encounter with the rebels emerged, ironically enough, as principal centres of classical music in the decades to follow. In the case of Awadh, which was annexed in 1856, the relocation of the Nawab with his retinue of ustadhs and entertainers proved fortuitous in providing Calcutta with an important cultural and artistic resource that the city's bhadralok and new middle class would consume and nurture.

The Mutiny has been seen as a watershed in the history of India. For the greater part of the country, it marked the moment of rupture with a pre-modern past and the inauguration of the forces of modernisation, even if the British crown preferred to maintain a low profile in matters of religious and social reform. While admittedly, the moment of reckoning had already occurred in regions like Bengal, which by 1857 had embraced and responded to the benefits and challenges of western education, the Mutiny made this transition unequivocal for the rest of the country. For music, the rupture with an earlier political and moral economy was not insignificant. While in terms of style, content and orientation the essential features of North Indian classical music had already been accumulated and expanded in the century of decline and transition, the changing context of patronage especially as music came under the purview of a modernising elite in cities and courts alike, exercised a profound impact on the social constituency of the tradition. As music dispersed and musicians spread outside their customary locations, they found it critical to invoke claims of authenticity for their music and the family they represented. A tangible manifestation of this process was in the emergence of gharanas or styles, all of which were intertwined with older webs of sociability based on Qawwal Bachhe teaching lines and kalawant families. At the same time, the increasing interest of the middle class in music was producing a new sociology of performance and pedagogy. Muslim ustadhs, hereafter, had to negotiate with an "orientalised" nationalism that privileged a constructed Hindu past and modern notions of institutional music education [Bakhle 2005].

NOTES

- 1 There has been important scholarly work on forms such as the thumri or instruments like the sarangi. See for instance, Peter Manuel (1989), *Thumri in Historical and Stylistic Perspectives* Motilal Banarsi Dass, Delhi. Also see Joep Bor (1986), 'The Voice of the Sarang: An Illustrated History of Bowing in India', *Bombay National Centre for the Performing Arts Quarterly Journal*, 15 (3/4), 16 (1), pp 1-183.
- 2 There are several classic accounts of Mughal decline. William Irvine (1971), *Later Mughals*, rev Jadunath Sarkar, reprint Delhi. A major intervention came in the form of Irfan Habib (1963): *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, Asia Publishing House, London and Bombay and Jadunath Sarkar (1971-75). *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Vol 4, Calcutta 1912-30, reprint, Orient Longman, Bombay. For more recent studies of regional political formations in the wake of Mughal decline, see C A Bayly (1983) *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars, North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Also see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds) (1998), *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, Oxford India Paperbacks, OUP, Delhi.
- 3 Most of the kalawants appear to have converted to Islam during the period of the Great Mughals and to have had close connections with the Chistis. The popularity of khyl appears to have grown considerably with the influence of Ba'hauddin Barnawi and the resurgence of Chisti influence. Although the kalawants sang dhrupad professionally, there is evidence that they participated in the musical activity of the dargahs. Taj Khan Qawwal's sons (*Muraqqa-e-Dehli*, p 78), Ghulam Rasool and Jani, sang the gayaki of Niamat Khan. See Thakur Jaideva Singh (1995), p 228.
- 4 Katherine Butler Brown suggests that this episode cemented a decline in kalawant fortunes from which they never really recovered.
- 5 See foreword in *Tarjuma I Manakutuhala and Risala I Ragadarpana* by Faqirullah edited and annotated by Shahab Sarmadee; Appendices, p 234.
- 6 Katherine Butler Brown's thesis on the emergence of the khyl documents the importance of Jaunpur and of Bahauddin Barnavi's contributions.
- 7 The Kashmiri/Persian sehtar seems to have replaced the longer slimmer tambur in the 18th century as the common lute, while the Tambur had transmogrified to become the tanpura – a sophisticated drone to accompany singers.
- 8 Ghulam Rasul and Jani were Lucknow's first khyl singers; the *Muraqqa* mentions them as prominent qawwal singers of Delhi. One may surmise that their lives spanned the century of transition.
- 9 The 'gat toda' is explained in detail by Miner. Masit Khan is credited for adopting actual dhrupad compositions for melodies to use in his gats.
- 10 Some sources suggest that Shakkar Khan was the son-in-law of Ghulam Rasool.
- 11 There are several versions of this story. Here, an attempt has been made to give an outline version and use it to make a larger point about the importance of the emerging Gwalior gharana.
- 12 Personal communication from Ustad Aslam Khan.

- 13 *Ghanam Krishna Iyer* in Tamil by U V Swaminatha Iyer (1936), Kesari Press, Madras.
- 14 The carefully adjusted buzzing bridge of the sitar, tanpura and been.
- 15 Kudau Singhs compositions and command of the 'pakhawaj' set new standards for the instrument in the early 19th century.

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