1857

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Eighteen-Fifty-Seven and Its Many Histories

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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369 articles from journals and periodicals and 108 works of fiction.[3] And that list is now already about nine years out of date, and we may add to that the ever growing number of books and articles written in Indian regional languages.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 Mukehrjee 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 Stokes[17] 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