

1857

A Brief Political and Military Analysis
INTRODUCTION : The rebellion of the Bengal Army in 1857 was a traumatic event in the history of British rule in India. Even today it is difficult to describe it as a 'War of Independence', 'Revolution', 'Religious War' or a 'Mutiny'. The discussion is made more complicated because of the fact that India is a jigsaw puzzle of races and ethnic groups made further complicated and confusing by the presence of a variety of religions, castes etc. Thus Indo-Pak History has always remained a far more confusing affair than let's say French or British History. Any event in Indian History is hard to judge because of presence of various aspects like diversity of race, religion etc. The Indo-Pak Sub-Continent has the unique distinction of being invaded, colonised and ruled by a multiple number of actors motivated by racial, religious, economic or commercial reasons. Thus whenever we pick any book on

Indo-Pak History we come across so many conflicting and confusing views like the Muslim view, the Hindu view, the British view etc. Behind every happening in Indo-Pak history there is some 'Conspiracy Theory', some ethnic or religious bias, some personal elements or grievances etc. One may think that this is true for all types of history. However in our case it is felt that these biases are much more pronounced because of the fact that we are still undergoing the historical processes through which many other parts of the world underwent five hundred or a thousand years ago. Perhaps all this is there because India and Pakistan even today are not cohesive integrated states with a clearheaded Intelligentsia or Leadership in the real sense. Perhaps the IndoPak Sub-Continent cannot be called a country or two or three countries in the real sense. One may add that Bangladesh is less trouble or confusion free being a nation state in the real sense despite its junior vintage in terms of length of years. We may state with

conviction that writing anything on any aspect of Indo-Pak History is a much more arduous task than writing history of any other country. Coming precisely down to Indo-Pak History 1857 is particularly a very challenging subject to write about. The major difficulty in writing stems from the fact that little is available from the Indo-Pak side since most of the people who formed the core elements of the rebels or freedom fighters or whatever anyone may choose to call them were either hanged or blown off the mouths of guns or destroyed in the Terai Jungle by disease or tigers. All those who were left were either living in British India and thus rendered unable to state anything based on truth because of fear of life or forfeiture of liberty. Some were so overwhelmed by disgust and grief that they thought it pointless to leave anything for posterity. Some who managed to save their life by escaping were so much pressed by privation and misery that they died premature deaths and were unable to leave for the future historians anything

which may have proved useful in arriving at a rational explanation of the design of events and may have enabled historians to understand whether the outbreak was based on deliberate planning or was a spontaneous outbreak. Thus we are left with three broad categories of historical accounts i.e. the 'Original British Viewpoint', the 'Indian Viewpoint while under Subjugation' and 'Modern Indo-Pak Reinterpretations'. Things are made yet more complex by other schools of thought like the 'Religious', 'Ethnic' and the 'Class Warfare' etc. Karl Marx called it the failure of the policy of divide and rule.

Muslim revivalist historians call it Jihad, Hindus have their own explanations, Modern Nationalist Historians have further made it more colourful and glorious by liberally mixing myth with reality! The British are ever keen to prove that it was a mutiny of troops. Thus anyone striving to write about history of 1857 has to struggle with various conceptual pitfalls and obstacles based on racial, religious and personal biases. The aim of this

work is to interpret the events of 1857 not from the religious or racial or any other personal bias but from the pure historical point of view; so that correct conclusions can be drawn; not as a Muslim or a Hindu or a Sikh or as a North Indian or a Punjabi or as any other thing. It is important because today the countries of Indo-Pak Sub-Continent are going through a critical phase in terms of historical reinterpretation, today people are questioning various issues which were previously too sacred to be discussed; today history has again become much more crucial than it was fifty or hundred years ago. It is so because today we are less emotional and more objective than let's say in comparison with 1947 or in 1859. Today there are less pressures and less compulsions than there were when Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was writing on 1857. At that time the issue was pure survival, today the issue is not immediate survival but long-term progress. Today religious divisions are less meaningful than they were in 1947 because today we are

more clear about what motivated leaders to manipulate their followers in a certain direction to achieve certain ends! Today the issue is not confrontation but reduction of armies and economic progress in the real sense. Another aspect of 1857 outbreak's importance was its influence on future British policy about India. In this sense this was in a way negative since the British reversed the policy of rapidly modernizing India and started supporting the feudal classes who Dalhousie was bent upon destroying. A foundation was laid for the communalization of the Indian Army. The policy of Divide and Rule received great impetus since the British realized that if the Hindus and Muslims combined like they had in 1857, India may prove to be very difficult to be ruled. Thus we see that after 1857 some very paradoxical policies were adopted by the British Government. On one side it was held that the Muslims were the main culprits of 1857, whereas the majority of the troops of the Bengal Army which mutinied were Hindus.

This led to reduction of the Hindustani i.e. East of Jumna troops both Hindu and Muslims while Punjab became the main area of recruitment with preference being given to Punjabi Muslims. Another effect of 1857 was that it induced Muslims to show greater loyalty to British in order to wipe out the stigma of disloyalty. 1857 remains a major landmark in the march towards Indian Independence since it convinced the Britishers that India could not be held at leisure and fear of another mutiny continued to haunt the British rulers right till 1947. On the other side another subtle effect on the freedom movement if it can be called one was the fact that Indians realized that the military option was not viable and thus Indians resorted to social reform and inner regeneration to prepare themselves for the challenges of the modern era. In this regard the main contribution of educating the Indians lies with the British. The Great Rebellion of 1857 occupies a decisive place in the history of IndoPak Sub-Continent. It

destroyed the English East India Company and destroyed a social order which was many centuries old. It was a highly complex event and even today many aspects of this phenomenal event defy comprehension. It influenced every class and section of the Indo-Pak Sub-Continent and acted as a primer for the complex set of events which finally led to the partition of India in 1947. There is no dearth of works dealing with the events of 1857. These cover every aspect of this great event. However invariably all works suffer from either of the following handicaps: (1) The British writers even if they don't want to unconsciously keep on presenting it as yet another example of 'How Great the British were!' They magnify the odds which their countrymen faced and exaggerate the sepoy numerical strength. (2) The historians most of whom are civilians go into unnecessary details at the cost of the essentials. They try at times to fit inadvertently adopted British actions into subtle but essentially ridiculous theoretical frameworks. (3) The nationalist

historians try to glorify it and while doing that endeavour without much success to present it as a super-human idealistic effort. The fact is that this rebellion had little in common with the Congress or League. It did not have the remotest connection with the two Nation or Greater Bharat theories! (4)

The Indo-Pak historians with a narrow regional approach try to project it as success of one ethnic group while condemning other ethnic groups who, in their opinion were misguided or collaborators or opportunists!

(5) There is yet another class of outwardly impressive historians who are slaves of preconceived ideas they digested without much understanding at so-called elite universities in the western world. They are always attempting to submit 1857 to the servitude of tools of conceptual analysis, they learnt while studying overseas. When one sees them one is reminded about a remark which Gibbon, the great historian made about one of the so-called great universities of the western world, that the days that Gibbon had

spent in that university were the most futile and barren days of his life! 1857 has been repeatedly analyzed by historians right from the year it took place. All historians or social scientists dealing with modern Indian history cannot get anywhere unless they study 1857. But then unfortunately 1857 has mostly been misunderstood. Thus correct conclusions have mostly not been drawn. Even today with so much of knowledge there are many misconceptions, half truths and sweeping judgements pertaining to 1857. For the sake of posterity it is important to remove these prevalent misconceptions and misunderstandings. This is, thus, my aim which has compelled me to make a humble endeavour to write something about 1857. Unfortunately it is an absolutely clear fact that whenever anyone belonging to the Indo-Pak SubContinent reads Indo-Pak history he or she finds very little which is positive or inspiring and a lot which makes one feel disgusted and disillusioned. This region is rich not only in culture but also in

contradictions and paradoxes. '1857' however is an inspiring saga whether it is the 'Rebel' or the 'British' side. We see genuine, very inspiring and titanic figures on both sides struggling against seemingly impossible odds. We see genuine patriots who defied death and destruction. We see the triumph of 'Heroes' on the British side and the triumph of opportunism on the Indian side. We are tempted to be led to the conclusion that if Mangal Pandey had instead gone to the Grays or Lincoln's Inn he would have fared much better! Or if Lance Daffader Basharat Ali of 3rd Light Cavalry instead of rebelling had fought on the British side in perhaps the Hodson's Horse, may be his grandson may have become a Field Marshal in the Indian or Pakistan Army. How foolish were the sepoy's of Bengal Army who mutinied! Had they remained proper their descendants may have had big Jagirs in Sargodha and Khoshab or in Rampur, Karnal, Mahmudabad or Nanpara, and would have been today's Senators! The history of India and Pakistan

after 1857 till 1947 has been called 'Freedom Struggle'. But closer examination reveals that it was more of a series of debates conducted in posh drawing rooms and magnificent conference halls. Indians and Pakistanis on both sides hardly shed any blood fighting against the British but much more blood fighting for the British in two World Wars or in cutting the throats of unarmed civilians during the transfer of power year of 1947. Thus, we see politicians spending a considerable amount of energy in downplaying the Indian National Army or the Bombay Naval Mutiny just because they did not want to be robbed of the phenomenal glory of having led a bloodless freedom movement which produced more bloodshed during partition than all combined unnatural deaths in Indian history from at least 1707 till 1947! But then all this is true in general for most parts and ages of the history of mankind. Man has always struggled in vain for utopian ideals which have mostly eluded him. Every titanic

struggle only took us further away from the ideals for which we had aspired but this is how history is and so far historians have struggled in vain to arrive at an all encompassing theory of history. Intellectual disgust with absolute distortion of history in Pakistan, in the name of religion, ideology hero worship and nationalism forced me to write this book. I have no axe to grind. I have no fervent desire to project any race or religion at the cost of history. An attempt has been made to tell the whole story without manipulating bits that support one side or the other. Naturally the picture which emerges as a result of this approach cannot be smooth and highly orderly