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Indian mutiny was 'war of religion'

India celebrates the 150th anniversary next year of the Indian mutiny or "first war of independence", when Indian soldiers of the British army rebelled against their colonial masters.



Dalrymple found original documents
(Photo: Raghu Rai/Magnum)

Conventional history says native Hindu and Muslim soldiers, known as sepoys, revolted against the British East India Company over fears that gun cartridges were greased with animal fat forbidden by their religions.

Not so simple, says internationally acclaimed writer and historian William Dalrymple.

In the first of a series of BBC interviews with newsmakers in South Asia, he says his research for a book on the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar threw up startling revelations.

Why do you say that the 1857 mutiny was primarily a war of religion when it has been widely regarded as a rising against British economic policies?

Up to now most of the data used by historians exploring 1857 has come from British sources. In the research for my new book, *The Last Mughal*, my colleague Mahmoud Farooqi and I have used the 20,000 rebel documents in Urdu and Persian which survive from the sepoy camp and palace in Delhi, all of which we found in the National Archives. In the rebels' own papers, they refer over and over again to their uprising being a war of religion. There were no doubt a multitude of private grievances, but it is now unambiguously clear that the rebels saw themselves as fighting a war to preserve their religion, and articulated it as such.

“ It is rather remarkable that all these papers in the National Archives have never been properly explored before ”

William Dalrymple

Your views

So was it less a rebellion against foreign domination as commonly believed?

The two are closely linked: but what the rebels most objected to in the foreign domination of their country was the way the

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British threatened their religions - the words *din* and *dharma* [the Muslim and Hindu words for religion] appear constantly in rebel proclamations, and were used as war cries by the combatants. They certainly appear far more regularly than secular declarations of the right to self-government or economic freedom, both of which are occasionally mentioned, but far less frequently than concerns over British intentions to impose Christianity on them.

Would you call it the first Indian jihad or holy war? The majority of sepoys who revolted were Hindu, weren't they?



An engraving of the Sepoy mutiny

Between 65-85% of the sepoys in each regiment were upper-caste Hindus. But as the uprising spread and progressed, the sepoys were joined by large numbers of freelance jihadis, while in Delhi the failure to provide pay or food for the troops meant that the number of sepoys gradually diminished as August progressed and many returned home, hungry and disillusioned.

By the end of the siege of Delhi, several observers estimated that the jihadis made up at least half of the remaining resistance, and it was they who put up the stoutest resistance when the British finally assaulted the city on 14 September.

You say that the sepoys were revolting against the rapid inroads made by missionaries and Christianity in India?

That is certainly the grievance that is articulated most frequently in the rebel papers we have translated. It may well be that Delhi is a different case to the various other uprisings elsewhere in the country.

You say the first suicide fighters were born during the mutiny. How do you prove this?

I have never said these were the first. There are references to suicide jihadis among the Ismaeli Assassins of Syria and Persia from the 11th Century onwards. But there are clear and specific references among the Mutiny Papers to a regiment of jihadis arriving in Delhi from Gwalior who are described as "suicide ghazis" who had vowed never to eat again and to fight until they met death at the hands of the kafirs [infidels] "for those who have come to die have no need for food".

You say that the flag of jihad was raised in Delhi and the mosque was at the centre of it. What was the reason for this "Islamist" uprising in Delhi?

It was much the same as the motivation behind the rising of the sepoys: a distrust of British intention with regard to the imposition of Christian laws, education and religious practices. In addition, there were those who believed they were following the Koranic



injunction to turn the Dar ul-harb, the Abode of War, back into what they believed should again be the Dar ul-Islam, the Abode of Islam.

Kashmir Gate - though which the British entered Delhi

Do you have any idea of how many Hindus who converted to Christianity or Christians were cut down during the mutiny?

Yes. There are specific references to the sepoys hunting down and killing all the Christian converts they could find on the day they first took Delhi. The first to be killed was a very high-profile convert called Chiman Lal who used to run a hospital in Daryaganj and was an official of Bahadur Shah Zafar. His conversion to Christianity had been a huge scandal in 1852, and he was immediately pointed out to the rebel troops on the morning of 11 May.

Do you think Indian historians deliberately overlooked or ignored the historical evidence when researching the mutiny?

No, but it is rather remarkable that all these papers in the National Archives have never been properly explored before: I feel rather like an Indian historian would feel if he were to go to Paris and find almost unused the complete records of the French Revolution sitting in the Bibliotheque Nationale. I think the difficulty of the Urdu shikastah script, and the strange late Mughal scribal conventions must have deterred many researchers. And for cracking that I have to thank the skill and persistence of Mahmoud.

What kind of evidence have you sifted through over what period of time to come up with your "war of religion" thesis?

This has been a four-year project. As well as the material in the National Archives, remarkable material has turned up in London, especially in the India Office and the National Army Museum, in Rangoon and especially the Punjab archives in Lahore. I have also used two long, detailed and reliable first-person Urdu accounts of the uprising in Delhi that have never before been translated into English.



Bahadur Shah Zafar - the last Mughal emperor

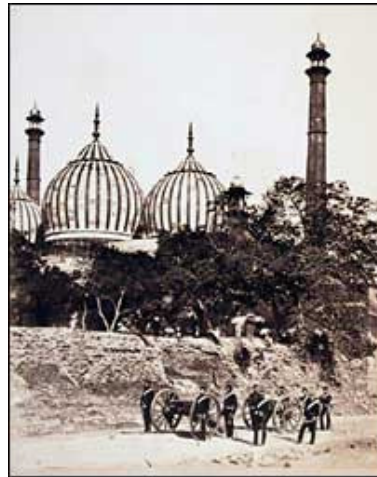
The most interesting of these is an account called the Dastan i-Ghadr of Zahir Dehlavi who was a young official in Bahadur Shah Zafar's household. I have been able to make numerous discoveries simply because, strangely enough, very little serious work has been done on 1857 in Delhi.

Hindu nationalist and right-wing groups in India are still railing against conversions and many states are trying to ban them. Do you think the jihad continues and could there be a second uprising or rather huge social upheaval against Christianity in India?

No. Those conversions that take place today are fringe activities usually taking place among tribal groups and sponsored by American Baptist organisations. What happened in 1857 was an uprising across the length of Hindustan, the modern cow belt, against the suspected religious activities and aspiration of the central government in Calcutta. So what is going on today - such as the church burning in Dangs of Gujarat in 1998 - is on a very different, much smaller scale.

In view of your findings, don't you find next year's celebrations in India to celebrate the uprising slightly misplaced, in a sense?

Not at all - 1857 was a pivotal point in Indian history. It changed everything, and the disastrous course of the uprising dramatically highlighted the shortcomings of the old Mughal feudal order. When Delhi fell in September 1857 it was not just the city and Zafar's court that was uprooted and destroyed, but the self-confidence and authority of the wider Mughal political and cultural world.



Indian soldiers feared they would be converted

Only 90 years separated the British victory at the gates of Delhi in 1857 from the British eviction from South Asia through the Gateway of India in 1947. But while memories of British atrocities in 1857 may have assisted in the birth of Indian nationalism, it was not the few surviving descendants of the Mughals, nor any of the old princely and feudal rulers, who were in any way responsible for India's march to Independence.

Instead the Indian Freedom Movement was led by the new Anglicised and educated colonial service-class who emerged from English-language schools after 1857, and who by-and-large used modern Western structures and methods - political parties, strikes and protest marches - to gain their freedom. Had 1857 not happened, modern Indian history might have taken a quite different course.

*William Dalrymple was speaking to the BBC News website's Soutik Biswas. His new book, *The Last Mughal*, is due to be published by Bloomsbury next month.*

This debate is now closed. Here is a selection of comments you sent.

Mr Dalrymple has made a sound assessment of the religio-politico nature of the 1857 Uprising. But his over-analysis of literature review has created a sort of paralysis of insight into the event. To categorise the 1857 uprising as merely a religious movement is over-simplification of what happened in those days. His analysis based on materials that exist from those days, misses the nature of entire Indian society. He has failed to look into the societal basis of the concerns cited in those materials and his categorisation of 1857 movement as

primarily religious is straitjacket and naive. Indian society has been a complex religio-politico mix and apparent religious movement has overriding political concerns.

Arunav Choudhary, Canberra, Australia

I commend Dalrymple's efforts to delve into the Indian archives, but his conclusions aren't new. Lawrence James said much the same in "Raj" in 1997, as did probably other historians before that. They said that it was the sepoy's perception that the army leadership was going to force them to convert to Christianity. At the time there wasn't a sense of an Indian nation, so there couldn't be a sense of nationalism. The sepoys had been ruled by the foreign Mughals for centuries, so it can't be that they were uprising against foreign rule. It was more that the British, who had banned sati and female infanticide, were perceived as challenging their religious rights. It was this that united the Hindus and Muslims against the British, not repression, nationalism or economic exploitation.

Rob Morton, Swindon, England

I was told that Gurkhas had a strong role in neutralising the 'mutiny'. However, the Gurkha Regiments also had 'high caste' Gurkhas. These high caste Gurkhas were penalised and their number were drastically reduced while recruiting. This is still the case in the present day British Gurkha Army. Is this discrimination due to the suspicious nature of 'Mutiny'. I served in the British Army as 'High Caste' Gurkha for 21 years and currently living in UK. Those years will be the best years in my life. However, having read this article some jig saw puzzles is coming in to place.....

Besant Lintel, Watford, UK

The mutiny was a response to economic, cultural and political hegemony of the British. Of course it attracted flanks of jihadists who fought against the British but 'Jihad' in the contemporary sense of the word, a reactionary action with religion as its only source of inspiration, calling for struggle in the name of a supernatural being, was NOT one of the forces of history that shaped the events of 1857. Far from it.

Muhammad Naru, Michigan, United States

Hindus and Muslims may have used the language of religion as a rallying cry, but to call the War of Independence of 1857 simply a religious war is missing the point. The plain fact is the British Raj was ruthless, arrogant and exploitative. There is overwhelming evidence that the British rule benefited a tiny minority, and hurt the majority

Ali Arshad, New Mexico, USA

The zeal with which the East India Company's officers and missionaries tried to convert Indians to Christianity was a factor in the 1857 rebellion but it was likely not the primary reason. The insensitivity of the British to both the Indian princes and to the company sepoys was a far greater irritant. However, the author is right out the religious element of the rebellion. It may be that more of the Indians that rose against the British were motivated by religion, or that religion played a greater part, than has been credited to date. I look forward to reading the book.

Gordon Jackson, Nanaimo, Canada

Suicide fighters (which the interview refers to) have been seen

in the field of war in many ancient cultures-Greek, Cheyenne, Japanese , possibly the great Indian mutiny, and many more. BBC should not over simplify things by allowing a parallel to be drawn between such warriors, and today's suicide bombers who primarily target (innocent) civilian populations rather than military targets.

Abhijit Bhattacharya, Mumbai, India

In reality there is no way to predict the direction history might have taken. But, had the sepoys won the uprising, India might have been several regional entities subsisting on their traditional economies, with different definitions of prosperity than those espoused by free market economists. On the other hand, we wouldn't have had cricket.

Prashant, New York

Mr Dalrymple is myopic as a historian to exemplify the war of independence as a jihad. Read your history Mr Dalrymple before you convert a historical fact into a jihadi event thereby diluting its importance.

RH Mayo, USA

I believe economic historian Neil Fergusson also made this same point a few years ago in his book Empire, specifically charging that 'WhiteChapel do-gooders' stirred up animosity through aggressive missionary work and suppression of un-Western cultural practices.

Stephen Wenzel, Woodstock, USA

One of the best interviews I've read in a long, long time. Both Dalrymple and the interviewer know their subjects thoroughly - a rarity these days. These revelations will change history writing on the Mutiny surely.

Donald Orr, London, UK

To come out with such unverified statements without having consulted Indian historians or experts is purely scandalous and that too in the 21st century.

Ranganathan, Tours, France

Very interesting. I wish there were some Indian historians/media people doing similar research, rather than just calling it a 'controversial interpretation'.

Pa, US

I think this war was the final settlement between the British and old Indian rulers for the power struggle in India. And cry of religion was just used to help in getting political gains.

Ajani Bhavya, Ahmedabad, India

Whatever Dalrymple's intentions might be in seeking to "set straight" the historical record, there can be no doubt that his readers will identify the 1857 uprisings as precursors of modern day Islamic terrorism. Sadly, this is no longer elucidation but further mystification. Religion no doubt played an important part in the "mutiny" but not in the Huntington sense that is being implied here. It should be no surprise to us at all that the symbols of religion were used to arouse the masses in much the same way as Gandhi used Hindu and Muslim symbols to whip up the Indian masses against the British. But it should also be a perfectly straightforward historical truism that occupied peoples don't like being occupied and will invariably - as history bears out - revolt. This

is sadly a message that people still don't get in 2006. Let's hope that future Dalrymples will not tell our grand children that Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Lebanon were all just about religion. And I'm sure there are lot of Arabic documents that could certainly be used in the future to support such a thesis though to anyone with eyes open it is clear that "religion" is pretty much a side show in regard to the "war on terror".

Sohail, Sharjah, UAE

Kudos to the author & researcher for his excellent work. This should lead the way for a more thorough investigation of other historical records buried deep in the ruins in the India sub-continent.

RK, Sunnyvale, CA

Mr Dalrymple's latest book will be a welcome addition to history of the period, and to understanding the events of 1857 objectively. Growing up in India, I was spoon-fed history of this period as compiled by British/European historians which, at the very least, was less than impartial. Later, perhaps as a reaction to that, nationalistic Indian historians put forth their version of events which tilted the narrative towards the other extreme. I commend Mr. Dalrymple's and his Indian partner's efforts to research the first-hand narrative left behind by Indian protagonists of this great tragedy. Cannot but wonder how such an obvious source of information goldmine could remain untapped for nearly 150 years in India! Thank you BBC for giving this book exposure. I will look forward to reading it with great anticipation.

Amit Sinha, Pittsboro, NC, USA

I am not sure why the findings of Mr Dalrymple should come as a great shock. Nationalism, as we understand today, was in its infancy in Europe during the mid nineteenth century. Therefore, it was only religion that gave the people of India their collective identity against a foreign occupation. Indian nationalism grew as the entire nation became a single political unit resulting for the completion of colonization. Even then, Islamic identity resurfaced and created Pakistan. In any case, the Mutiny was an watershed event in the history of India. We should thank the author for his effort.

Dipak Gupta, San Diego, CA, USA

The word 'dharma' in Sanskrit means more than the word "religion" as it is used in current context. Your duty to your country is referred to as your 'dharma'. The duty you have for your parents is also referred to as your 'dharma'. So for the author to cite the use of the dharma to prove his point that it (the mutiny) was a religious war is a hogwash. It is another example of westerner trying to influence Indian and South Asian history.

Bhaskar Tripathy

I am sure historians will subject this new piece of research to a critical scrutiny but I found the following statement misleading: "Instead the Indian Freedom Movement....by-and-large used modern Western structures and methods - political parties, strikes and protest marches - to gain their freedom." Considering the fact that Indian freedom movement was led in large part by Gandhi, whose methods of non-violence protest and non-cooperation have been universally recognized as spectacularly innovative. Indian

freedom movement is also one of the biggest such non-violent movement in the history.

Prakash Kashwan, Bloomington, USA

As a native of India I really appreciate the work William Dalrymple has done in revealing the facts. Its gives us a better picture of what really happened and why it happened back in the colonial era.

Chandra, NC, USA

I am extremely excited for Mr. Dalrymple's new book. His perceptions and arguments, presented in his previous works, have been very well researched, balanced and fair. His literary style is refreshing. The first Indian War of Independence remains shrouded in mystery, even for many of us Indians and hopefully, Mr. Dalrymple's in-depth research can provide some factual insight into it.

Itishree Trivedi, Livonia, U.S.A

There are several accounts of missionaries supporting the British rule which made mixing politics with religion inevitable at that time. Indian historians have neither overlooked or ignored the fact that religion was a factor but they certainly have not sensationalized the matter to suit present day politics and theme.

MJ, USA/India

Dalrymple's research clearly affirms the fact that the Hindus and Muslims were united (in terms of religion) at one point (1857), but the differences between them today are the results of the 'divide and rule' policy of the British and the continuing appeasement and ghettoisation of the minority Muslims of India.

Nipun Shukla, Atlanta, GA

I think William Dalrymple's thesis is interesting. It would be good to get the response of Indian historians to his argument, in order to start a debate on the precise origins of Indian nationalism.

Shouvik Datta, Incheon, South Korea

I am severely disappointed with this piece. It drew my interest because we Indians have not been very critical of how our history has been presented to us and I was hoping for a fresh look. Though excited over this new important discovery, it left me feeling this author was looking at events through a distorted western lens. I find it unconvincing that it was a religious war more than a war of independence. Its actually impossible to separate one from the other, several of our wars, both between and within different religious communities have invoked faith. This either could be for legitimacy or maybe a genuine acid test for justification.

Kalid, Bihar, India

William Dalrymple is a known writer and researcher and has penned works of thought. The research he has come up with is boggling as it totally changes the history's course. After reading his upcoming book The Last Mughal we will get the true insight of the event.

Anam Gill, Pakistan

Mr Dalrymple's statement that "conversions" to Christianity in India today occur only in "tribal places sponsored by American

Baptist organisations" is a gross understatement and a very myopic outlook of reality. Perhaps he should delve some more before forming such a lopsided opinion. Not all conversions are "sponsored" - many are free-willed choices. And of those new Christians, everyone isn't a "tribal".

Kunal M, Leeds

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