

OPINION

The Story of the Storm — 1857

Columnist Hamid Hussain looks at the 1857 War of Independence dispassionately.

Introduction

‘If this be the policy it will be working its own ends and purpose... Oudh will become another “Cabul” the scene of our national disgrace, dishonour and bloody massacres. I speak with a warning voice, because I have opportunities of seeing and hearing what the people think of the policy now pursued’
Englishman, 16 January 1857 1

1857 is an important landmark in the history of Indian subcontinent. This landmark event has been called mutiny, rebellion, war, uprising and war of independence depending on who described the event. Several different factors were at play long before the rebellion but the sudden outburst of violence and its rapid spread gave the movement a transient unity of purpose despite stark differences and diversity of India. Various individuals and different groups joined the rebellion for different reasons. The presence of so many different factors makes the task of comprehensive analysis of 1857 in any single work impossible. In 1857, different regions of India not only differed in geography and composition of inhabitants but also in terms of local customs, relationship between different communities and political scene. Eighteenth and nineteenth century was an era of dramatic change in India. Old guards were coming down crumbling and new realities sometimes very harsh were being created. Dislocations, social upheaval and anxiety accompanied with such changes was felt everywhere. Gradual decline of old central authority and emergence of a new alien power of East India Company had resulted in resurgence and emergence of religious, caste, ethnic, clan and family feuds to the forefront in many localities.

A large number of writings about the 1857 rebellion started to emerge right during the rebellion. With time the volume of such writings steadily expanded. Almost all the writings are narrative of events. What happened when and who did what? Every author had his own convictions and prejudices which reflected on the historical work. General perceptions of anger, hatred, betrayal and cruelty influenced the people who wrote about the rebellion either immediately or long after the event. Same event was seen with a different perspective thus giving it a different interpretation. It is, therefore, critically important to evaluate each work in proper perspective and not to make a final judgment on the basis of anyone or for that matter several works relating to the events of 1857. It will be futile to explain the complex events of 1857 on the basis of one single concept or theory. Benjamin Disraeli, then member of the Parliament had rightly stated that, ‘The rise and fall of empires is not an affair of greased cartridges’. A non-judgmental, non-biased approach to the subject will give one a better appreciation of the scenario. ‘The main duty of a historian is not composition of eulogy or invective but interpretation of the complex processes and conflicting ideas in the most objective way’.² This article will briefly review the writings of 1857 rebellion and highlight some important areas of the conflict. For detailed description of events, the reader should refer to the excellent narrative work done by different authors.

History of the Historians

Most of the early writings about rebellion were by British who were involved in the historical process.

The soldier saw it as the epic of his bravery and valour, the missionary saw the rebellion as a conflict between 'truth and error' and 'displeasure of God on the British' while others saw it as a conspiracy either by Muslims or Hindus or both together. The veterans of these campaigns against the rebels saw themselves as heroes. 'The Mutiny thus furnished an excellent medium for a display of the magnificent and shining exploits of British valour'.³ The works of these authors though helpful in terms of particular details of battles, lack the objectivity. It was narration of personal experience which was obviously heavily influenced by the emotions and excitement which is an essential component of any conflict. The writings by the military participants of the conflict are a good source for those who are interested in the military aspect but have very limited value in comprehensive analysis. There was no serious analysis of rebel leadership. The reason for this is obvious. After all if the brave and self-righteous British were fighting for a just cause, then the rebels were only a bunch of murderous mob led by some blood thirsty, debauch and corrupt leadership. In this view of a British historian there is not much room for any mention of rebel leadership except just few passing comments.

Sir George William Forrest wrote the history of Indian mutiny. He was the director of records of Government of India. His father was Lt. (Later Captain) George Forrest who won Victoria Cross defending the magazine in Delhi. It is quite natural to expect how he would have viewed the events. His father's exploits and valour were to influence his narrative. Several officers who participated in the battles of rebellion wrote their memoirs. Major Norman, Colonel Baird Smith and Colonel Keith Young narrated the events at Delhi. Captain R.P. Anderson and W. Forbes-Mitchell wrote about siege of Lucknow. The civilian British administrators who wrote their version of the events included Edwards (Badaun), Greathed (Delhi), Robertson (Saharanpur), Taylor (Patna), Gubbins (Lucknow) and Sherer (Cawnpur). All these narratives are good in documenting the events of the respective areas.

There are no significant authentic original accounts of the rebellion by the natives. The diaries kept by Mirza Moinuddin Hassan Khan, Munshi Jivanlal and Chunilal give some account of happenings inside Delhi while diary of Nanakchand give some glimpse of events in Cawnpore through native eyes.⁴ It will be too naive to expect that these natives looking for reward or not to implicate themselves after the British victory would write anything good about the rebels. Moinuddin was a sub-inspector of police in the suburb of Delhi at the time of rebellion. He fled to Persia and returned after two years. He came as he was sure that he would not be punished as he had saved the life of Theophilus Metcalf. At the request of Metcalf, he wrote his experience of the rebellion but gave the manuscript to Metcalf on the condition that it should be published after his death. The apologetic work by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan went at length explaining the benefits of English rule and portraying rebels as a murderous mob and stating that there was no participation by the noble class. The life of Syed Ahmad and his thought process was based on his experience. As a child he had sat in the lap of Major General David Ochterlony, the British resident in Delhi and played with the gold buttons of his uniform. His maternal grandfather, Khwaja Farid-ud-Din, who made an early childhood impression on Syed had served the British in several important assignments. Syed had accepted the permanent status of power of British in India and any attempt to subvert it was seen as a challenge to a legitimate authority. In addition to that, Syed admired Syed Ahmad Saheed, a reformer who died fighting the Sikhs. His Afghan comrades betrayed him. Syed had held Afghans in contempt. In Rohilkhand (including Bijnor and Bareilly), the descendants of Afghans were in the forefront of the rebellion. Syed's work is a rare example of a thorough account of the events in Bijnor and Moradabad as he was the witness and an active participant in the events. He was in Bijnor at the time of rebellion. In April 1858, he was posted in Moradabad as Principal Sadar-e-Amin. He served a member of the commission appointed to investigate the disposition of properties seized from notables who sided with rebels.⁵ It is extremely

helpful in knowing the exact details of events in that area but cannot be used for comprehensive analysis due to obvious bias of Syed in favour of British. In early part of twentieth century, India was experiencing the emergence of nationalist ideas. In Bengal a violent campaign against British was in progress. The English educated Bengali intelligentsia which was freshly infected by the European nationalist ideas at the early part of twentieth century went to other extreme and tried to portray the rebellion as a grand show of national struggle by a hypothetical Indian nation against alien rule. In this backdrop, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar published his work on rebellion in 1909. It was titled 'History of the War of Independence'. These works were more like imposing one's own ideological bent on a historical situation. In 1957, government of India sponsored work by Surendranath Gupta titled Eighteen Fifty-Seven reviewed a good portion of literature on rebellion with some favourable comments about rebel leadership.

A recent addition to this catalogue is A.H. Amin's 'The Sepoy Rebellion'. It is an excellent work looking at different aspects of the rebellion in depth and more balanced. His work is free of generalized, rhetorical statements of many later Muslim writers who tried to portray 1857 as a grand show of Muslim martial spirit. He does another fine job of evaluating the effects of the rebellion on the Indo-Pakistan political scene. An area where he is a bit carried away is that he puts a label on the future generations of the natives who participated in the rebellion. From social point of view, it is critical to analyze the background of people who participated in later Indo-Pakistan politics. Ideas do not occur in a vacuum. Our thoughts and actions are moulded by the ideas, actions and experiences of our parents, friends and acquaintances. We are affected by our perceptions of events which are happening around us. Having said that it is also important to evaluate each individual on the basis of his own actions. If someone's father or grandfather committed a crime, his progeny cannot be held responsible for the sins of their forefathers. He should be judged according to his own actions. Surely, Nawabzada Liaqat Ali Khan could be criticized for many of his policies and actions during his political career. Knowing his background will help to understand his thought process but it cannot be used as a broad based broom to beat him up for his acts of omission or commission.

Military Aspect

The company's native army had performed very well for over a century winning large part of India for the company and bringing stability. Company's army was not a static entity but a self-sustained living cosmos which was itself undergoing a significant change. The usual ripples accompanied with these changes were also occurring whether someone was noticing it or not at that time. Overall, there has been a gradual change in the Company's army. The native army which conquered India for the John Company was composed of autonomous regiments. The British officers posted in these regiments were for life. They saw themselves as 'fathers' of the native sepoy. The 'commanders could reward or punish their sepoy with almost complete impunity'.⁶ By 1840s, there were significant changes. The young officers of the company started to distance themselves from the native sepoy. One factor was the arrival of increasing numbers of European women. Earlier British officers lived with native concubines and even married native women. Most British officers were well versed with native languages, knew the cultures of their regiments and mixed with native officers and sepoy. Now the younger generation of officers, both bachelor and married developed their own little white worlds, increasing the gulf between them and their native sepoy. 'The men were badly treated, sworn at, and called "niggers" and "pigs".'⁷ The annexation of new territories needed new administrators and several military officers were posted to civilian jobs. Officers coveted these civilian jobs as they brought more money, fame, honour and a break from monotonous garrison life. In early 1850s, Colonel Frederick McKesson was civil commissioner of Peshawar while Lieutenant Harry Lumsden was serving as

deputy commissioner and Captain James an assistant commissioner. Similarly many officers like Nixon in Bhurutpur and McPherson in Gwalior were serving at civilian posts.⁸ Old and infirm officers were left behind to command the regiments. The centralization and reform decreased the authority of officers of the regiment as the list of regulations kept proliferating. Any measure of extra money for sepoy going on far away campaigns advocated by military officers were fought furiously by company bosses in Calcutta. In July 1856, general enlistment order was proclaimed which stated that sepoy would serve anywhere if ordered. This meant that a Hindu might have to cross the dreaded 'Black Waters' at the cost of losing his caste. In early 1857, rumours were rife among native sepoys in many cantonments. The sepoys of 2nd Bengal Native Infantry (BNI) told their Colonel that there were unmistakable signs that the company was bent on destroying the religion of the natives. They pointed to contamination of salt, ghee and sugar of its sepoys with the bones of pigs and cows. Hindu soldiers interpreted the reddish colour of the salt from the dye of the sack as cow's blood.⁹

A.H. Amin has discussed in some detail the perception of company's military effectives by the native sepoys.¹⁰ We with the benefit of command of different languages and historical hindsight can see these things more clearly but the perception of sepoys in 1857 needs a more careful evaluation. Surely, the setbacks of company's army in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century would have affected the perception of native participants of these battles. The overall impact about half a century later on a new generation of native soldiers, mostly illiterate and with no means of information or communications with other parts of the country would have a limited impact. Even the more recent campaigns against the Sikhs were viewed in the light of overall victory of British arms and sepoys were not in a position to do a critical analysis of the setbacks in individual battles. More important is the fact that the scenes which they witnessed after the start of rebellion had a more pronounced effect on the sepoys. Murder of British officers, refuge of civil and military officers in entrenchments and general breakdown of law and order in affected areas would be a more powerful signal to the wavering native troops that the company's rule was about to end. Having said that, it is also true that at least there was dent in the aura of invincibility of the British arms with defeat in First Afghan War and setbacks against Sikhs. More important than the military setbacks in Afghanistan was the psychological trauma of sepoys. Subedar Hidayat Ali, a third generation of loyal sepoy of the company wrote in 1858 to his British superiors about the troubles of sepoys during Afghanistan campaign. Hindu sepoys were fearful of losing their caste. Their colleagues refused to smoke or dine with them as they were considered outcasts.

Although in later part of rebellion there was general disaffection in most regiments of Bengal army but in the early part of the rebellion, the regiments which started the mutiny in their stations need to be carefully studied. They had particular historical background and specific immediate causes of unrest. Only A.H. Amin has looked into this aspect in some cases. The 3rd Cavalry which started the rebellion in Meerut had run into problems in September 1855 when stationed at Bolarum near Hyderabad. During Muharram, Colonel Mackenzie had issued a cantonment order of prohibiting noisy procession at midnight. After realizing that it was Muharram, the order was cancelled. The procession in which several cavalymen participated proceeded along the route and in front of Colonel Mackenzie's house there was a heated conversation between Colonel and some participants of the procession. Later, there was an attempt on Colonel Mackenzie's life. Some cavalymen later told Colonel Carpenter that they were loyal to the government but their religion has been insulted. In an inquiry all native commissioned officers of 3rd Cavalry were with two exceptions dismissed.¹¹ The 2nd Native Cavalry stationed at Cawnpur had an interesting history. It was raised in 1787 and had fought bravely in various campaigns. In 1840, two companies of the regiment fled when confronted by a small body of Afghan horsemen. The exact cause was never established. One possibility is the origin of troopers of

the regiment which were mainly Afghans of Qandahar origin who had settled in Lucknow¹² and they may not wanted to confront their ethnic kin though separated by a time span of sixty years. The outraged commander disbanded the whole regiment and all European officers were transferred to 11th Native Cavalry. In 1850, one of the old officers captured the Sikh standard in Multan. Impressed by this feat of bravery, the Company restored the old number of 2nd Cavalry. Nana Sahib's commander of the guard, Jawala Prasad worked on the disgruntled Risaldar Teeka Singh and won him and his house in the lines became the centre for all disaffected sowars.¹³ The 56th BNI at Banda was involved in operations against Santals in 1855-56. The operations against Santals were different than earlier campaigns against many local armies. This was a scorched earth policy in which sepoys burned villages and hanged Santals. It was more a counter-insurgency operation rather than the romantic headlong charges on enemy forces. This gave the sepoys their first encounter in suppressing civilian population on a large scale. The wife of Captain William Halliday of 56th BNI had Bible printed in Urdu and Nagri and distributed among the sepoys convincing them that the British were there to convert them to Christianity. 10th Native Infantry stationed in Fatehgarh which rebelled had officers like Major William Lindsay who had spent most of his career as a staff officer with little interaction with his sepoys. It was commanded by a mediocre sixty years old Lt. Colonel George Smith who had served most of his life in 47th BNI and had taken charge of 10th at Fatehgurh. He had seen his last action in the battlefield about thirty-eight years ago. The sepoys did not know him. His second-in-command was fifty one year old Captain Robert Munro who had managed to serve in the Indian army for thirty years without ever fighting a battle.¹⁴ The 10th BNI also had a peculiar experience. This regiment had served in Burma travelling in ships. Brahmins called the sea, 'Black Water' and believed that they will lose their caste by crossing the sea. The regiment had agreed when their officers had promised rewards which never came. Locals jeered the regiment as Christian Regiment. The local scene was spiced by the affair of pensioned nawab with the wife of an ensign Reginald Byrne. The ensign when seeing his wife with nawab, had kicked him out of the door.¹⁵ The 19th and 34th Bengal Native Infantry were at Lucknow at the time of annexation of Oudh. It was quite natural that sepoys were affected by the general discontent which was aroused with the annexation. In February 1857 both these regiments were in Barrakpur. When 19th BNI came to know about new cartridges, they refused. The Colonel confronted them angrily with artillery and cavalry on the parade ground but then accepted their demand to withdraw the artillery and cancel next morning parade. On March 29, Mangal Pandey of 34th BNI (the regiment was thoroughly disaffected due to the zealous Christian preaching by its commandant Colonel Wheler) shot at two British but when the General John Hearsey (an officer of old school) came himself thundering on the parade ground alone, Mangal turned his musket to himself and wounded himself in chest. Two days later, when 19th BNI was being disbanded, the sepoys were weeping in front of Hearsey and blessing him for his mercy. Lt. Colonel George Smith who was not popular among the officers and men commanded the 3rd Cavalry which rebelled at Meerut. When the condemned sepoys were marched off to jail, they threw their boots at Lt. Colonel Smith.¹⁶ Quite a contrast to how the disbanded sepoys behaved to General Hearsey.

Several regimental officers who had spent long years with their sepoys trusted fully their native sepoys. Colonel Thomas Pierce of 6th Light Cavalry stationed at Nasirabad sent his eight-month pregnant wife to sleep in the quarters of native officers families. His sowars had a bloody skirmish with the rebellious 15th Bengal Native Infantry. Later they switched sides but didn't harm their officers.¹⁷ Colonel Wart had vowed that if his regiment mutinies it may walk over his body, but he will never leave it.¹⁸ 47th BNI at Mirzapur remained loyal as it was commanded by a wise old Colonel David Pott greatly respected by his men. Colonel George Sherer of 73rd BNI stationed at Jalpaiguri was of the view that disarming native regiments was counterproductive. He never even carried any personal weapon with him while with his troops in line.¹⁹ Patrick Grant of Madras Army

had avoided the problem of greased cartridges by allowing his soldiers to lubricate their cartridges with Ghee, clarified butter rather than animal fat. 31st BNI at Saugor remained staunchly loyal, without any support from British soldiers, under their own native officers they chased and defeated the mutinous 42nd BNI and captured their colours and arms.²⁰ The 1st and 3rd Cavalry and 2nd Infantry were stationed in Aurangabad. These regiments were composed mainly of Muslims. In late June 1857, when the troops came to know that they might be part of the force of General Woodburn to advance on Delhi, there was disaffection among the 1st Cavalry. The prompt arrival of Woodburn, disarming of small number of mutineers and escape of one troop stabilized the situation. ²¹ The troops remained loyal to British and 3rd Cavalry under Captain Orr fought well against Holkar's troops. Many native officers like Risaldar Major Bhawani Singh of 1st Cavalry, Jemadar Khoda Buksh of 56th BNI remained loyal even when their regiments mutinied. Sebedar Ram Buksh begged to be allowed to join the garrison at the entrenchment of Cawnpur but was not allowed. He tried to carry the regimental record in a cart to safety but was looted by a band of peasants. 53rd and 56th BNI at Cawnpur were steadfast. They were repeatedly taunted, abused and threatened by the rebel troopers of 1st Cavalry and even then only part of the regiments joined the rebels. In fact several sepoy of 53rd assembled on parade ground with their arms to help British officer quell the mutiny but by now General Wheeler was not sure himself and he ordered artillery fire on the sepoys thus assuring their desertion. Similarly, in Benaras when native regiments were being disarmed, Ludhiana Regiment (consisting of Sikhs) mistakenly thought that they were also being disarmed and rebelled.²² After the uprising at Meerut, the situation for British became very difficult. In fact, the very instrument of disarming of native regiments to prevent the rebellion became the main immediate cause of outright mutiny by native soldiers. The attempts at disarming and dismounting of native regiments caused panic and quickly escalated to revolt. Whenever disarming was attempted, the sepoys thought they have lost the confidence of the British and European troops will mow them down without any qualm.

The British officers and men fought with a determination and passion as they were defending their own homeland. This is the reason that even today, it is considered a glorious chapter of British military history. In the later part of rebel operations, as the atrocities on women and children by the rebels were known, revenge became the force multiplier. In many battles of the rebellion, 'interior impulses, largely vindictive, made the British fight with a demonic energy and contempt for the odds which were often stacked against them'.²³ The British won the day due to the presence of dare-devil young officers who led from the front. In several instances brave officers were able to weld the wavering sepoys together and prevent the mutiny. One such officer was Captain Edmund Vibart of 2nd Native Cavalry. In May 1857, he was passing through Fatehgarh to Naini Tal. When the riot in prison started, the sepoy guard just watched. Captain Vibart was hit on his face by a brick. The enraged, bleeding Vibart ordered the sepoys to charge on the prison. The sepoys fired, killing several prisoners and chased remaining into their cells. One gallant officer by his action was able to rally wavering sepoys which even didn't belong to his regiment. In Delhi, it was the tenacity of Richard Baird-Smith which prevented the timid General Wilson to retreat from the ridge. Officers like Hodson, Nicholson and Collin Cambell saved the day for the British.

It is very difficult to assess and analyze why in one place the sepoy rebelled while in another place he remained staunchly loyal. What factors influenced him in the critical hour of making that decision of dishonour his oath and colours. One cannot generalize the motives of all the sepoys. The colonel of 47th BNI devised an ingenious plan telling his men to loan their pay to locals at high interest rates. The sepoys wanted no part of any anarchy as they will lose high income. Maharajah Jaiiji Rao Scindia of Gwalior sided with British. He only financed his contingent which consisted of sepoys who were recruited on the pattern of Bengal Army. The sepoys mutinied on June 14 but never marched to

Delhi.²⁴ While A.H. Amin attributes this to clever propaganda by the Maharajah²⁵ but more important factor was the fact that Maharajah continued to pay their salaries, so they had a more convincing reason to stay at Gwalior. In the early part of the rebellion, most of the rebel sepoy and their leaders fought bravely and with tenacity. As the sieges prolonged, the inner conflicts emerged and initial euphoria dissipated, the sepoy started to waver. In Delhi, due to the laxity of discipline and avoidance of many sepoy to fight, Bakht Khan issued an order that no man who left in the morning to fight could return within the walls until 4 p.m. He also decreed that no man would qualify for the day's pay until he had done battle with British.²⁶ Several sepoy quietly left for their homes. 17th BNI at Azamgarh, after mutiny plundered the treasury. When they reached Faizabad, they were relieved of their loot by the rebels from Jaunpur and Benaras. The rebels out of control were a larger threat than the British. The rapid deterioration of discipline among sepoy dismayed many. In Oudh, Subedar Teeka Singh of 2nd Cavalry became general while Jemadar Durga Singh of 53rd BNI became colonel. His angry Muslim troopers who accused him of amassing private wealth summarily arrested the newly promoted General Teeka Singh.²⁷ One aspect of the rebellion which has not been studied and discussed in detail is the murder of British officers and their families. As it is now clear that there was not a large scale general conspiracy to overthrow Company's rule. Most rebellions in garrisons were local affairs prompted by local causes or excitement generated by the news of successes of rebels in other areas. Even in one regiment, there was not a unanimous decision of all sepoy to mutiny. Many sepoy did not condone the behaviour of the rebel comrades but were caught in the eye of the storm. The ringleaders of the rebellion aware of this clear and present danger probably executed officers and their families as a first act to make sure that there was no going back. This act assured that all sepoy who may not be agreeing with the plans of the rebels have now to throw their lot as after the murder of the officers it was clear to everyone that there will be no pardon or mercy. In several places British officers were shot or cut to pieces on parade grounds or in their homes. Ironically, the same was to be done more than a century later in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). East Bengal Regiments which mutinied in 1971, took a page from the history of 1857 rebellion. Although there was a general resentment among the Bengali sepoy but it was the action of junior Bengali officer to execute West Pakistani senior officers in front of the sepoy to assure mutiny of the whole regiment. In Jhansi, 12th BNI and 14th Irregular Cavalry was stationed. On June 5, 1857, only one company of 12th led by one native sergeant marched to Star Fort and became rebellious. The remaining four companies of 12th and 14th Cavalry remained loyal and on parade professed their loyalty and were angry at the conduct of rebellious company.²⁸ It was after the murder of commander of the troops, Captain Dunlop that the remaining sepoy joined the rebels. Other officers like Ensign Taylor, Lt. Turnbull and Sergeant Major Newton were killed in the early part of the rebellion. The remaining garrison along with women and children was put to sword by the orders of the Risaldar. Similarly the detachment of 12th BNI at Naogaon commanded by Major Kirk, volunteered to serve against the rebels. A portion of them rebelled after the news of murder of whole garrison of Jhansi arrived in Naogaon.

Only A.H. Amin has discussed in detail the role of Enfield rifle in the conflict and its impact on the results of war. There is no doubt that superior weapons are a key factor in the outcome of wars but the issue has to be evaluated more carefully. In early nineteenth century, the romance of all armies including India army 'lay in its assaults: glorious, audacious, headlong rushes on the enemy'.²⁹ all despite their effectiveness against assault disdained trenches and foxholes. Whenever this technique was used such as by Wheeler's entrenchment in Cawnpur and by rebels in Lucknow, it was successful. Enfield played a significant role but not in all battles of the rebellion. His statement that, 'it was above all the "Enfield" Rifle which was the real victor of 1857'³⁰ seems to be a very general and we need to look more carefully at the role of Enfield. The effectiveness of Enfield played a significant role in some battles of the mutiny like the battle of Trimu Ghat on July 12 31 and also in the battle of

Fatehgarh. Enfield rifle was issued to only British troops and according to Amin in 1857 there were only eight infantry and two cavalry regiments and thirteen batteries of artillery consisting of British troops.³² No native troops loyal to British and irregular cavalry was issued Enfield. In addition, even the British soldiers were not well acquainted with the new rifle. Havelock left about three thousand Enfield rifles in Allahabad as his soldiers were not accustomed to these rifles. In addition, in the early models of Enfield, bullets jammed so tightly the armourers were forced to bore them out. The high numbers on back sights were taken to indicate velocity instead of range. The result was an elevation that made fire ineffective.³³ In many fiercely fought battles like the ones for capture of Delhi, and many strongholds of Lucknow (Kaisarbagh, Sikandarbagh and Shah Najaf) were frontal charges. Bayonets and close range fighting played a more significant role in these battles. Small fortifications in the cities, blocked streets and loophole walls and houses were taken from rebels by close fight.

At the onset of rebellion at one garrison showed some organization and discipline but it quickly dissipated. Mutiny, confusion, looting, murder and further confusion were a sequence which was tragically repeated in almost all areas with few exceptions. Even in one location there was no unified and organized effort by rebels to plan their actions. In Delhi, the troops, princes, court and commander-in-chief were all collecting funds from the people independently from one another.³⁴ Only in areas, where a strong leader was able to exert some influence did an organized effort emerge but that was also transient. There were too many mutually exclusive sometimes hostile forces were at play in the rebel camp to allow for a large scale centralized effort against more organized British forces.

Social Aspect

The rebellion has to carefully evaluate as any generalization would lead to wrong conclusions. Overall, the rebellion did not have a clearly defined course and it differed markedly from region to region. Various overlapping factors were at play at same time thus making the task of well organized analysis very difficult. India of 1857 was not one country in modern sense but a collection of various areas inhabited by diverse groups. The rebellion was limited to certain areas and a large segment of the population remained loyal. A.H. Amin had discussed very eloquently this diversity and the reasons for rebellion or loyalty of various groups.³⁵ As in any conflict, socio-economic factors play an important role but it is important to see them in proper perspective. Some authors have treated the subject appropriately while others have gone to the extreme to portray the whole event as an economic struggle launched by peasants on Marxist lines which is not true. The rebellion was essentially by the previously dominant classes in the North-Western Provinces (North Western provinces consisted of eight divisions — Meerut, Delhi, Agra, Rohailkhand, Jhansi, Jabalpur, Allahabad and Benares. Not to be confused with North West Frontier Province which was separated from Punjab in 1901), including both Hindus and Muslims. There is no doubt that a large number of people of India had grievances against the company government. In the early part of rebellion, many preferred to wait and watch rather than throw their lot with one side or another. They expected an aggressive and overwhelming response from the company army. The fact that ‘the government had been caught off balance with its military resources stretched to breaking point’³⁶, resulted in a slow or no response thus encouraging many to side with the rebels thinking that the company rule is coming to an end. This explains the second wave of mutinies in Lucknow, Cawnpur and Azamgarh, which occurred almost one month later than the Meerut uprising.

Several legislative measures of the company challenging centuries old traditions caused many apprehensions. Sutte (burning of widows on the pyres of their husbands) was abolished in 1829. James Ramsay, the 10th Earl of Dilhousie became Governor-General of India in 1847 and embarked

on ambitious administrative reforms which will shake the foundations of centuries old customs of the ancient land. The thirty five years old workaholic Dilhousie reformed almost every aspect of the Company's rule in India. Several measures taken by the British in annexed areas raised the caste and religious feelings. These measures roused the suspicions of Hindus and Muslims alike. New legislative measures in 1856, allowing Hindu widows to re-marry raised Hindu suspicions. Enaction of laws allowing converts to inherit property caused doubts in both Hindu and Muslim minds. In early nineteenth century there was increasing missionary activity in India which was seen as an organized attempt of an alien group to let the natives stray away from their religions. British attempts to discourage early marriages and joint messing of convicts in jails and compulsory shaving were seen as intrusion into the traditional ways and an attempt of proselytizing. In 1855, Mr. Edmond issued a circular letter from Calcutta stating that in railway train no caste distinction will be made in the seating arrangements. Even in military, sepoys resented the efforts of some officers with missionary zeal. These religious activities of Lt. Colonel G.S. Wheler of 34th BNI in Barrackpur and Major Mackenzie in Bolarum were directly responsible for the disaffection among the sepoys. The famous Mangal Pandey who fired at his officers on March 29 was from 34th BNI. In 1837, Persian was abolished as a language of the court thus making a large number of Muslims unemployed in Bengal. English magistrates replaced Muslims who were attached to courts as Qazis, Muftis. In Bengal, even under Muslim rulers, Hindus were employed as revenue officers. Hindus going ahead in education retained the jobs in newly anglicized revenue system. In early part of nineteenth century, the law barring appointment of any Indian to a post carrying an annual salary of 500 sterling pounds effectively curtailed any future prospects of a native under new government.

It should be remembered that east India Company was a commercial entity with the primary objective of increasing its revenue. Social and political fallout from their decisions and long-term negative effects were a low priority on the minds of the agents of the company. The annexation of Oudh in 1856 was the single act which thoroughly alienated almost all classes of that region, including rulers of native states, landed aristocracy, courtiers, sepoys and peasants.³⁷ In north western provinces, British adopted the policy of not resuming the Jagirs after the death of the holder to its descendants. Instead, they gave the heirs fixed pension. From 1847 to 1856, the company in this way acquired Nagpur, Jhansi, Satara and Sambalpur. In Bengal and northern India, landholders became fearful of their future under British. Similarly, the revenue free land holders in Bengal and North-Western Provinces came under scrutiny as the company wanted to increase its revenue base. In North Western Provinces a large number of resumptions of revenue-free lands occurred between 1850 and 1856, causing a surge of anti-government sentiment. In contrast, in Sindh, Napier made the landlords as the aristocracy of the land thus attaching their interest with the British, hence no unrest in Sindh during 1857. Talukdar (owners of large groups of villages) were powerful feudal barons and a recognized institution of nineteenth century Central India. They have been the intermediaries between the rulers and village proprietors for centuries. The land policies of British in North Western province removed the intermediary Talukdars. In Rohailkhand (This division consisted of Bareilly, Badaun, Bijnor, Moradabad and Shahjahanpur), many landed elites were Muslims. The new revenue policy disposed many of them. This powerful lot of landed aristocracy became hostile to British and British would pay with blood for this nearly fatal mistake. The new set of village landowners though removed from the rapaciousness of the talukdars had their own grievances. The mix of specific complaints about revenue and taxes, cumbersome and lengthy new British judicial system and sharing of general anxieties of the public at large resulted in such an equation that the potential beneficiaries of new British policies ended up rallying around the old guard of landed elite. British courts gave legal protection to the money lenders (Mahajans) who were able to acquire landed interests which were confiscated. This was one of the reasons that everywhere, the rebels burned government revenue

records, account books of money lenders and destroyed their property. In contrast to Delhi, where soldiers were in the forefront of resistance, in Lucknow it was the levies of talukdars rather than regular sepoys who gave the British tough fight. In 1852, an act was passed for scrutiny of rent-free tenures. The tribunal called Inam Commission aggressively went after rent-free tenures. From 1852-57, in Southern Marhatta country alone about 35 thousand estates were called for and in 21 thousand cases sentences of confiscation were pronounced.³⁸ In Bengal similar measures brought extra income of 5,000,000 sterling pounds per year while in Bombay it was 370,000 sterling pounds per year. After the annexation of Oudh in 1856, a vigorous settlement policy was pursued which resulted in enormous social upheaval. In Cawnpur area, boats between Calcutta and Cawnpur transported most of goods. These boats were owned and operated by Hindus living in the vicinity of Sati Chowra Ghat. Their fortunes had been declining with the arrival of British as British-owned steamers, railways and Grand Trunk Road were taking away all their business.³⁹ The middle of nineteenth century saw the end of the era of military adventurers, most of who were Muslims from northern India. After the Marhatta and Pindari wars, although good number of soldiers was enlisted in the Company army but still a large number became unemployed. In 1854, the number of these angry out of job soldiers was estimated to be 100,000 in Rohailkhand and surrounding areas.⁴⁰ When Wajid Ali Shah was deposed in February 1856, 200,000 strong royal army was dispersed. Apart from soldiers, many others who depended on the army such as 12,000 armourers became jobless.⁴¹ Later government ordered talukdars to dismiss their armed retainers thus resulting in swelling of number of unemployed who gradually drifted to large cities. These disgruntled ex-soldiers were now scattered all over Oudh.

Adding insult to injury, British dropped any pretense of respect to previous ruling class. In 1803, Shah Alam was a British pensioner with eleven and a half lakh rupees and ruling powers limited to the Red Fort area. This was a fact but for illiterate native, the King in Delhi still represented a mythical past of glory. Senior officers of East India Company omitted gradually all normal courtesies to a king. In 1844, nazar to King was abolished. In fact, in 1851, Bahadur Shah Zafar was receiving 833 rupees per month in lieu of his nazars. In 1820s, Heber wrote about the possibility of Muslims rising against the British but the reasons he argued will be political and not religious. One of the reasons which he mentioned was 'the conduct of Lord Hastings to the old emperor of Delhi'.⁴² The jewels of family of raja of Nagpur were sold in an auction in Calcutta. After annexation of Oudh, chief Commissioner used Umbrella Palace as stable for his horses. Similar measures at local levels in dealings with local elites caused resentment.

The role of Hindus and Muslims and their relationship with each other was also a complex phenomenon and varied from region to region. Hindus mostly led the civil risings in Oudh, Bihar, Gorakhpur and Central India.⁴³ Many leaders of the uprising such as Nana Sahib, Tantya Topi and Rani of Jhansi were Hindus. After the rebellion was suppressed, land from Hindus was confiscated in large scale in Meerut, Jhansi, Etawa, Jabalpur which were the centres of Hindu dissatisfaction. In Patna and Bijnor, Muslims helped British to regain the control. In Rohailkhand, Fatehpur and Bulandshahar, the sites of Muslim discontent, confiscations were predominantly Muslim. Nawabs of Karnal, Muradabad, Dacca and Rampur and Nizam of Hyderabad remained loyal to British. Some confiscated land was awarded to the loyal subjects, both Hindu and Muslim and remainder auctioned off. The relationships between Hindus and Muslims during the rebellion were complex and depended on local scene and the conduct of the local rebel leaders. In Rohailkhand, the rebels were almost exclusively Muslims (In Bijnor their leader was Nawab of Najibabad, Muhammad Khan and in Bareilly Khan Bahadur Khan). The rebels raised the green flag and used religious symbols. When the rebels robbed rich Hindu merchants and bankers, the cleavage lines between two communities

widened. The worsening law and order situation in the area with bands of marauding gangs of Gujars, Maiwatis, Jats, Chauhans and Banjaras creating havoc culminated in a sanguine battle between Hindus and Muslims at Haldaur on September 18.44 In Malawa, Firuz Shah headed the rebellion. The religious zeal attracted many Muslim tribes but alienated Hindus. In Cawnpur, the leadership by Nana Sahib roused the suspicion of influential Muslims. Initially, he arrested Nunne Nawab, an influential Muslim noble of Lucknow who had settled in Cawnpur. Later, under pressure, Nunne Nawab was not also released but made commander of a section of the force with artillery batteries. A crisis situation occurred when two Muslim butchers convicted of killing a cow died from bleeding when their hands were amputated. The sowars of 2nd Cavalry along with a large Muslim crowd confronted Nana and threatened to displace him. The showdown between Hindus and Muslims was averted by an apology from Nana and hectic efforts by his Muslim counsel, Azeemullah. Ironically, the last rebel stand against British was by a former government lawyer, a Hindu chief Ramnarayan at a place named Islamnagar.

The British rule in Punjab and Frontier had effectively ended the anarchy in Punjab and north western borders of India. The populace in general especially Muslims saw British rule as benign and peaceful. That is why, Muslims of these areas sided with British in 1857. Sikhs, Pathans and Muslims from Punjab rushed to India to fight side by side with British. The famous march of Guides from Mardan to Delhi is now a legend. William Hodson commanded a regiment of irregular horse of 300 Punjabi and Pathan troopers who were known as 'Plungers'. In areas, where the general population sentiment was not hostile to the British, the regiments which rebelled didn't succeed to damage the British. This was the case in Ferozpur, Ambala, Layyah, Mianwali and Peshawar.⁴⁵ Ironically, the revolt of 1857 which is seen as a first organized attempt against colonial hegemony, 'established the Punjab as the bastion of colonialism and strengthened the basis of an authoritarian structure'. The results were far reaching as 'political institutions in the Punjab lagged behind their counterparts in the rest of the subcontinent'.⁴⁶

Native Players

Several authors had written a lot about the motives of different leaders of the rebellion. The opinion ranges from 'hatred' to 'some supreme national cause'. As related to other aspects of the rebellion any generalization in this particular area will lead to wrong conclusions. A. H. Amin had discussed this subject more rationally without much rhetoric but he seems to distribute the titles of 'patriot' and 'opportunist' a bit more casually. Each individual local leader of the rebellion had his or her particular reasons for joining the revolt. This was equally applicable to various groups who sided with the rebels. 'The sepoys fighting for fear of castes, the chiefs for their kingdoms, the landlords for their estates, the mass for fear of conversion and agrarian grievances, and the Muslims especially for restoring their old sway, yet all in their own way against the common enemy, the English'.⁴⁷ Several tribal communities (Gujar, Jats, Palwars, Bhogtas, Maiwatis) joined simply due to the ample opportunity of plunder in a situation of a general breakdown of law and order. India of 1857 was not a nation state in modern sense but a collection of various groups with autonomous local chiefs. Rebellion provided to many ambitious men an opportunity to act on their dreams of grandeur. Many rebel leaders invoked the name of old Mughal king of Delhi, but 'that was a pseudolegalistic ploy more than a real act of loyalty'.⁴⁸ It is clear from several writings of British and natives that even the rebel sepoys in Delhi actually in contact with the king did not show any respect and talked to him rudely. They probably knew the real worth of the opium addicted statue of a dying era. Petty leaders set themselves up as rajas and even kings. In Banawar, Qalandar Khan set himself as raja while Kadam Singh of Prachitgarh proclaimed himself king. Umrao Singh declared himself a raja after getting hold of one village of Manakpur while Fatua of Buddhakheri proclaimed himself king of the

Gujars. Rao Bhopal Singh at the head of his Chauhan followers declared a Rajput government but poor fellow was surprised at his place and promptly executed. Others like rajas of Kutra and Mainpuri, Apa Sahib, Shahamal and his grandson Lujjram (Jat) of Baraut, Narpat Singh (Rajput) of Akulpur enjoyed the power and fame for few months.⁴⁹

We will probably never know the real motive of a particular local chief to join the rebels or British. Probably several factors may be at play in each case when the critical hour of decision came to choose one's bet. Most of local chiefs which sided with rebels were in the vicinity of Delhi. Abdurrahman of Jhajar, Hassan Ali Khan of Dojana, Nahar Singh of Ballabgarh, Tularam of Rewari, Walidad Khan of Malagarh and Ahmad Ali Khan of Farrukhnagar.⁵⁰ The Rajput chiefs of Jaipur, Bikanir and Alwar were not much interested in re-surrecting the decaying Mughal rule. The political rivals of local chiefs who sided with British decided to take a chance and sided with rebels. The Maharajah of Jodhpur, Takht Singh sided with British offering his troops. His rival Thakur Kushai Singh worked on Jodhpur Legion which deserted to the mutineers.⁵¹ Mohammad Hassan took control of Gorakhpur rallying disgruntled landed elites although he had no mutinous troops. He was the former governor of Gorakhpur and had lost his position after the annexation of Oudh. Similarly, the Chief of Nargund, Baba Sahib in Southern Marhatta country, who was denied the right of adoption declared war in May 1858 when British were re-asserting themselves after initial setbacks. It was mainly civil uprising as no mutinous troops were involved in the conflict. In Rohailkhand, Mahmud Khan of Najibabad waited till all areas including Bareilly, Moradabad, Mandawar had rebelled and almost all British officers were killed or had fled to safety. Seeing the changed winds, many locals gathered around Mahmud Khan as he seemed to be poised to take control of the area. When Mahmud arrived in Bijnor on June 7, he had about 200-250 Pathan musketeers with him.⁵² There is no detailed account of the exploits of several local leaders of the rebellion like Mehdi Hassan of Sultanpur, Fazal Azim of Rae Bareli, Banda Hussain a Lt. of Mehdi Hassan, Rao Sahib, Maulavi Sarfaraz Ali of Gorakhpur, Maulvi Sikander Shah of Faizabad, Ghaus Mohammad Khan of Sikandra Rao and Kunwar Singh.

Tantya Topi though with no military experience, learned the art of war on the field. Tantya was six years older than Nana Sahib and his playmate. He arranged for the defence of Bithur, the toughest challenge to Havelock's force. He repelled Windham's assault on Cawnpur. He later made unsuccessful attempt to relieve the siege of Jhansi. Even after the setbacks, he was one of the few who appreciated the opponent's weakness. This resulted in a fast moving guerrilla warfare in Nagpur and Gwalior in the summer of 1858. Unfortunately, this 'display of tactical brilliance was too late to influence the outcome of a war which had already been decided by British victories at Delhi and Oudh'.⁵³ He was betrayed by Raja of Nawar (Raja rebelled against British but when the pendulum swung in their favour, he betrayed Tantya to re-habilitate himself) and hanged.

Nana Sahib was born as Govind Dhondu Pant and was the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao. When Baji Rao died in 1851, the company according to an earlier ruling of not recognizing the adopted sons of a deceased ruler stopped Baji Rao's pension. Nana Sahib was deprived of not only his pension but also hollow titles, his seal and yearly allocation of even blank cartridges for his guards.⁵⁴ Next few years Nana kept sending petitions to the Company for resumption of his pension while entertaining British officers at his palace in Bithur without any success. The ideas of Azimullah Khan to attempt to recover his throne and predictions of his guru, Dassa Bawa that one day he will be victorious and his own dreams of grandeur may have effected him to take a bold course of siding with the rebels.

Azimullah Khan was another figure which appeared on the scene of rebellion and had a very interesting background. During the famine of 1837, as a starving boy along with his mother, he was

given shelter at the mission at Cawnpur. He attended the free school and became fluent in English and French. After working with several Englishmen, he was hired as translator by Brigadier John Scott. After the death of Baji Rao, he was in the court of Nana Sahib. When Nana chose Azimullah to go to England to plead his case, a search started for an experience guide to accompany him. An educated Rohailkhand noble Muhammad Ali Khan had visited England in the employ of King of Nepal. Muhammad Ali had no love for the British. He was a bright young man and passed the Calcutta Civil Service examinations with flying colours. Being a native, he was hired as a foreman where his arrogant superior insulted and humiliated him. He resigned the service in 1851 and ended up accompanying King of Nepal on a three month tour of England. In England, the intelligent Azimullah dressed in western outfit impressed many luminaries of the time. He met John Stuart Mill and the wife of Prime Minister's cousin who was gentleman Usher to the Queen, Lucie Gordon. He met Dickens, Carlyle, Macaulay, Tennyson and Thackeray and had seen the Queen.⁵⁵ He was probably the only Indian of his time who with the intelligence and the opportunity to visit the land of his masters was able to evaluate British. The awe of the British which was maintained in India was to be shaken. The splendid city of London was actually smothered with industrial smoke. He was unable to convince the authorities to resume his master's pension but on his journey back, he stopped in Constantinople and visited the battlefield of Crimea and brought with him a French printing press. Although his mission failed but he had come back with a more dangerous idea. He presented a more ambitious agenda for Nana, telling him 'why worry about his measly stipend when he might annihilate the English and recover his throne?'⁵⁶

The former dancing girl and later the Queen Hazrat Mahal's behaviour was more praiseworthy than her debauch husband, Wajid Ali Shah. Wajid when told about his exile was 'weeping, pleading, baring his head to the appalled and embarrassed Colonel Outram.'⁵⁷ On the contrary, in November when a shell hit the palace gate, the garrison panicked and soldiers fled away. The indomitable Hazrat Mahal remained staunch and when told chiefs to cut her head before running away, they stayed feeling the shame and humiliation. On another occasion, she sent a pair of women's trousers to a faint-hearted chief with a note stating that better he should put them on and to retire to his proper place — a harem.⁵⁸ She spent 50,000 sterling pounds of her own money to build a wall around the city. She had the rare leadership qualities to gain the confidence of both Hindus and Muslims. She was able to prevent the division between two communities due to the activities of religious zealots like Maulvi Massih-us-Zaman and Babar Ali.⁵⁹ In this effort, she was helped by Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who not only worked for cooperation between Hindus and Muslims but between Shias and Sunnis of Lucknow. She was able to rally the soldiers, landed nobility and city population to her cause. In middle of 1859, when the rebel cause seemed to be doomed, Hazarat Mahal and her two staunch Hindu allies, Beni Mado and Hanumant Singh refused to surrender to British.⁶⁰

Lakhshami Bai, the Rani of Jhansi's role is somewhat controversial. Although she along with several local chiefs had grievances against British, it has not been proven that she had any role in the mutiny of 12th BNI and 13th Irregular cavalry stationed at Jhansi on June 5th. She had to pay ransom to the rebels before they left Jhansi. In fact on June 12 and 14, she wrote letters to Erskine, the commissioner of Sagar division assuring him that she would hold Jhansi on behalf of the British. Erskine in a formal letter authorized her to collect the revenue.⁶¹ She led her troops against the Dewan of Orchha, an old rival. This suggests that in the early part of the rebellion when she was quite vulnerable to both British and rival chieftain's attack, she favoured siding with British but later the ambiguous British diplomacy and declining of her protestations of loyalty that she decided to fight the British. She personally commanded the defence of Jhansi working with the defenders who consisted of mutineers, levies and mercenaries. She not only showed her superior administrative and military skills but also personal

bravery in combat. She only trusted the five hundred Kabuli Pathans of her army, who escorted her after her defeat at Jhansi. She earned the respect and praise of even her enemies when she died on the battlefield at Gwalior.

In Bareilly, the garrison rebelled on May 31, 1857. After the routine of initial confusion, disorder, looting and killing, Khan Bahadar Khan was proclaimed leader. He was the grandson of a revered Rohilla chief. Interestingly, the army in and around Bareilly was the largest, about 57 regiments with gunners and sappers. Despite that there does not seem to be a close cooperation among military and civil leadership of the rebellion to take advantage of this huge difference in balance of power. There were tensions between the civil leader Khan Bahadar and military leader Bakht Khan. Bakht Khan was smart and had taken control of the Bareilly treasury. He calculated his odds and with the treasury and the strength of a brigade under his command, he had a better chance at Delhi.⁶² Once in Delhi, with both the money and sepoys, the confidant Bakht Khan approached Bahadur Shah Zafar and asked the old king to appoint him commander-in-chief which the king obliged. Unfortunately, in Delhi, he found his nemesis. The commander of Nimach rebels, Muhammad Ghaus Khan became his bitter rival thus preventing a unified stand of the rebels.

Conclusion

1857 was the watershed in the history of sub-continent. It was such a confusing catalogue of events that to decipher them individually would be an impossible task. On one hand, the rebels were destroying everything attached to the British rule like bungalows, telegraph, official records while on the other the rebel troops fought in their red uniforms under their regimental colours, kept their muster roll update and wore the medals awarded by British. In one instance at Cawnpur, Havelock encountered a rebel unit whose band was playing Auld Lang Syne.⁶³ The immediate effect after the rebellion was the change of colonial thought process. Prior to 1857, 'The British viewed India as a social laboratory for transformation in the former's image — a social revolution which would change backward India into a modern society along the lines of an intrinsically western model'.⁶⁴ The blend of 'nationalism and evangelism' of British had convinced them that it was God's will which they were fulfilling. They sincerely believed that with the marvels of modernism, railways and telegraph, they will 'bring or drag reluctant India into the modern world'.⁶⁵ The great revolt was a kind of rude awakening for the British. British officials saw the revolt as a consequence of upsetting of the social status quo of India by British policies. In post-1857 period, 'enlightenment was no longer a priority and maintenance of law and order became the essence of future British policy in India'.⁶⁶ In British mind, the native Indian population was divided into two groups. The groups which ignited the revolt (Brahmins and Muslims of Oudh) were seen as cunning and untrustworthy and were awarded the punishment they deserved. The groups (Sikhs, Muslims of Punjab and Frontier, Princely states) which sided with British were considered loyal and appropriately rewarded. It is clear now that if the loyal natives had not helped John Lawrence in Punjab, Edwards and Davidson in Hyderabad, Gubbins in Benaras, Robert Ellis in Nagpur and Osborne in Rewa, the Indian history would be different. The lessons of rebellion of 1857 are not interesting for historians only but leaders of post-colonial states have to ponder over the blunders made hundred and fifty years ago. The reason for this advice is the fact that both civil and military leadership especially in Pakistan has more of a colonial mind set rather than the thought process of an independent nation.

(The incentive of writing this article was the work of Agha H. Amin 'The Sepoy Rebellion'.)

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