

## ***Historians, History, and Historiography: The 1857 Uprising***

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### Abstract

The 1857 uprising has been of special interest to historians till date. Not only are authors interested in what the motivation behind the event was, but also how it has been interpreted ever since its occurrence. This essay deals with the main developments that have been made in the historiography of the uprising and how its dynamic perception has constantly been subject to change.

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On a visit to commemorate the bravery of the members of the 60<sup>th</sup> HMS rifles while visiting the key sites of the 1857 uprising in Meerut, in September 2007 elderly members of the British community were stopped by authorities, who justified their decision by stating that it could offend the Indians. The visitors were then escorted away, after which their tour was cancelled. <sup>1</sup> This event reflects the significance the uprising still holds and the different perceptions it is ascribed. Not only this, the continued scholarship relating to the event also mirrors its importance. Existing scholarship and research is formidable and does not provide one wholly agreed upon perspective. Therefore, one has to be mindful while being exposed to this spectrum of views, more importantly, careful in analyzing the historical precedents and political agendas various authors present in their writing based on their interests.

Dialogue regarding the 1857 uprising commenced as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself, with historians, mostly British, struggling to find one answer to the dichotomy: whether it should be labeled as an 'uprising' or a 'mutiny.' Voices in London such as those of Ernest Jones hailed it as a rebellion, whereas that of Marx linked it to the anger displayed by the 'proletariat' class due to the hegemony brought by the colonial expansion. <sup>2</sup> At the same time, other voices such as those of Syed Ahmed Khan were being heard that countered the allegation of the mutiny as a 'Muslim conspiracy.' <sup>3</sup> Kaye aimed at settling the confusion a decade later by stating that the uprising was simply a counter-modern approach that aimed at reverting to the traditional, backward way of life the Indians had inherited and intended to live. He argues that the struggle was a battle against the 'white domination' and was simply motivated by reactionary, native yearnings by alienated officers in the name of religion. <sup>4</sup>

Following the same vision, Indian intervention in the debate came around the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Sarvakar's pro-nationalist stance was on the other polar end to that of Kaye's by calling it an 'independence war' driven by 'Swadharma and Swarajya.' <sup>5</sup> Moreover, the striking factor in Sarvakar's take is that it goes beyond the religious boundaries. Such a stance comes as a surprise from a nationalist like Sarvakar, since he considered the Hindu-Muslim divide as the most important component of Indian history. Kaye and Sarvakar can and are pigeon-holed for their opposite stance regarding the event, however the importance of their work should not be simply dismissed. Both, one being an imperialist and the other a nationalist, produced mastered works that remain to be the most widely known accounts of the events till date. Sarvakar was not the only one to put forward an Indo-centric revision of the event. It is evident that even in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.highbeam.com/publications/hindustan-times-new-delhi-india-p408843/sep-21-2007>

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Jones, *The Revolt of Hindoostan; or, The New World*, Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, London, 1857; Karl Marx, *The New- York Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1853, in Marx and Engels, *The First War of Independence, 1857-1859*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 34, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2000

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Kaye, *History of the Sepoy War in India*, 3 vols. (London 1867)

<sup>5</sup> V. D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, London, 1909

the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people like Misra in their contemporary work, Mangal Pandey (2002) and 1857 A.D.: Clash of Civilizations (2007) note a similar conception and produce a revolutionary conspiracy to fit the Indian agenda. <sup>6</sup>

F.W. Buckler, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provides yet another insight to the event. He overturns the perceptions of the audience by stating that the 'mutineers' were not necessarily the Indians, but instead the British themselves, thereby, labelling Indians as legitimists who were struggling to revise the hierarchy and the sovereignty of the Mughal emperor. <sup>7</sup> Hence, contrary to popular perception of interpreting the uprising as overthrowing order, Buckler argues that it was instead meant as a legitimist restoration. Other Indian intervention came about this time as well. Instead of dealing with the aims and aspirations of the movement – such promoting a nationalistic vision – it dealt with the causes and motivation behind it that reiterated the phenomenon from the Indian lens. One such example is that of Guha, who analyzed the event in terms of 'peasant uprising.' <sup>8</sup> Other Indians analyzing the class struggle include Roy and Dutt, who saw the failure of 1857 as a huge blow to the feudal power and system. <sup>9</sup> Similar Marxist writing was also being produced by British historians such as Eric Stokes, who produced two volumes focusing on the time around the revolt. In his first volume, he analyzes the event of 1857 as an elitist movement that was led mainly by the dominant classes as a 'caste mobilization.' <sup>10</sup> However, in the next volume, he moves beyond simply class and shifts his focus to the common people, by not simply relying on economic reasons for the revolt but also taking into account culture, mindset, and ecology. <sup>11</sup>

Moving beyond the idea of a sole class struggle and oversimplifying the event through economic explanations, authors such as Tambiah, Das, and Brass and others have taken into account even ethnic reasons and the ground level localized riots in the context of contemporary South Asia that provide a more convincing framework to assess the situation of violence in 1857. <sup>12</sup> This is not to deny the logic of exploitation through peasant insurgency, but to argue that one cannot place 'oppressors' and 'oppressed' simply in binary categories because within each one these labels lie qualitative differences between the roles of entities.

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<sup>6</sup> Misra, Amaresh, Mangal Pandey: *The True Story of an Indian Revolutionary* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005); Misra, Amaresh, *War of Civilizations: India AD 1857* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> F.W.Buckler, 'The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny', *Royal Historical Society Transactions*, vol.V, 1932.

<sup>8</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> M N Roy with the collaboration of Abani Mukherji, *India in Transition*, J B Target, Geneva, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Peasant Society and Agrarian Rebellion in Colonial India*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978

<sup>11</sup> *The Peasant Armed: The India Revolt of 1857*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> S. Tambiah, *Levelling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflict and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Access to more sources post-independence produced interesting developments by historians such as R.C. Majumdar, S.B. Chaudhuri, S.N. Sen, and K. K. Datta, who were not unanimously willing to accept the uprising as the first 'war of independence.' These works went beyond the simple dichotomy of the categorization of opposing narratives – one that the British had 'won' or that the Indians had been 'defeated' – and shifted focus towards the internal contradictions within class structures of Indians. In this way, one can say that this was when Marxist traditions were employed alongside nationalistic narrative, to forward the new possibilities of historiography by moving the label from independence war to 'civil rebellion.'<sup>13</sup> Another interesting aspect presented by Bayly is that of 'information panic' that reflected the shortcoming on both sides – the British and the Indian. He argues that the British regiment failed to cope with information regarding indigenous practices and movements. Conversely, this can also be applied to the Indian misreading of the British – information panic about the British reforms as an attack on their culture and religion.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a new wave of fusion between scholars and authors of different backgrounds struggling to provide a fresh outlook on the uprising. These mostly include academic works of Bhattacharya, Pati, and Mazumdar and so on.<sup>15</sup> Such collaborations include a diverse inclusive source list demanding close attention to oral accounts, folklore, and songs in the memory of the uprising. This has set the path of new inquiry and avenue. But not everything that happened or is recorded during the time is useful or relevant to our understanding today. In a rush to widely include every source within the framework of the publication, the quality of the produced work can be asserted to have been compromised.

This essay sought to touch upon some of the significant historiographical developments made regarding the 1857 uprising. Whether one classifies it as a 'civil war', 'mutiny', 'peasant uprising', or an 'independence war', it nevertheless reflects the consistent interest historians, and people, have in it while at the same time, no single interpretation holds to be more convincing than the other.

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<sup>13</sup> R C Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1957; S B Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-59*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1957 and *Theories of the Indian Mutiny*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1965; S N Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, Publication n Division, New Delhi, 1957; and, K K Datta, *Reflections on the Mutiny*

<sup>14</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 171–4.

<sup>15</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Rethinking 1857* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007); Biswamoy Pati (ed.), *the 1857 Rebellion: Debates in Indian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2007); Shaswati Mazumdar (ed.), *Insurgent Sepoys: Europe Views the Revolt of 1857* (Delhi: Routledge India, 2010); Biswamoy Pati, *the Great Rebellion of 1857 in India: Exploring Transgressions, Contests and Diversities* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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