

RIYA GAUTAM

BA PROGRAMME

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NATURE OF THE REVOLT OF 1857

INTRODUCTION:-

On 10 May, 1857 entire sepoy regiment at Meerut rebelled. The next day as rebels reached Delhi they asked old mughal emperor for his blessings and thus to give their actions legitimacy. The revolt gradually spread to Ganga-Yamuna doab leading to breakdown of administrative framework in north India.

The revolt of 1857 has been considered as a watershed in Indian history. For almost a year the British rule was wiped out from north India. It was only in the spring of 1858 that control over Delhi was again established by Britishers. Initial historiography on the nature of revolt has taken into account memoirs, journals and personal narratives to understand the events of the revolt.

The act of defiance by sepoys made British and European historians call it '**sepoy mutiny**'. This set trend for **imperialist historiography**. In '*History of Mutiny*' by *John Kaye and GB Malleson*, the main reason of mutiny was spread of rumours that the new Enfield rifles whose cartridge has to be bitten off is covered with fat of cow and pig. These rumours according to Kaye and Malleson hurted religious sentiments and thus created image of British as their common 'enemy' of both hindus and muslims. *Richard Holmes* also agrees with this view.

Another scholar *HG Keene* blames 'over ambitious policies' of Governor-General Lord Dalhousie as the main reason of mutiny. Dalhousie introduced policy of 'Doctrine of lapse' according to which if the king has no biological son then state will fall in British hands. As a result states like Satara, Jhansi, Punjab and Nagpur were annexed. Dalhousie also made reforms in army which snatched privileges from high caste sepoys leading to resentment among them. As *Ishita Bannerji* points out Dalhousie 'misjudged' level of backwardness and conservation of his subjects.

Presence of Mughal emperor as a 'legitimate' figure in the revolt made imperialist historians call it a '**muslim conspiracy**' against British rule. However this theory was refuted by *Sayyid Ahmed Khan* in urdu essay '*Asbab-e-Bagawat-e-Hind*' published in

1858. According to him the revolt was not confined to sepoy mutiny but was general outbreak due to several grievances. Also as Rajat Ray points out 'restoration' of Mughal emperor does not imply that rebels wanted to go back to centralised mughal state but to the period where autonomous rulers enjoyed autonomy. Delhi and Mughal emperor just acted as symbols of 'familiar world' for rebels.

Incidents like Bibighar massacre at Kanpur shaped image of Indians as 'barbaric' and 'backward' in imperial historiography. Thus the imperial histories highlighted the necessity of British rule in India and commemorated the death of brave British soldiers.

It was in 1909 that first attempt was made to study the revolt from **nationalist perspective**. *VD Savarkar* was first historian to label revolt as '**Indian War of Independence**'. He rejected imperialist theory where rumours were main reason for sepoy mutiny. Savarkar's views were supported by scholars like *SB Chaudhuri* for whom revolt was the 'first organised attempt to challenge foreign power'. According to Savarkar it was for 'swadharma' (one's own religion) and 'swarajya' (one's own realm) that the rebels revolted.

However, Savarkar's theory was rejected by scholars like *RC Majumdar* and *SN Sen*. First of all, nationalism in its modern sense has not been there in mid nineteenth century and therefore the use of the term 'Indian' by Savarkar becomes problematic. Also, not whole country participated in the revolt. Areas like Punjab, Bombay and whole of southern India remained unaffected. The educated elites of these areas made 'strategic' alliance with British and thought that they can take India 'forward'. Therefore, it is wrong to say revolt as a 'pan-Indian' war of independence. As *Thomas Metcalf* points out 'revolt was more than a sepoy mutiny and less than a national revolt'.

From 1920s histories on revolt came from **marxist perspective**. According to *MN Roy* the revolt was a struggle between worn out feudal structure and newly introduced commercial capitalism. For *Palme Dutt* 1857 was a peasant revolt led by decaying feudal forces fighting for their privileges.

In historiography, there has also been debate on '**feudal nature**' of revolt. Scholars are divided on whether the revolt was 'elitist' in character. According to *Judith Brown* the revolt had feudal elements as it was marked by leadership of powerful magnates who gave direction to the revolt. Even *Jawaharlal Nehru* called revolt 'feudal outburst' and did not support it as it was primarily pro-British. The theory of 'elite' has received a lot of criticism. As *Rudrangshu Mukherjee* points out not in all the cases lords took leadership. If they took leadership it was either due to personal grievances or due to

pressure of rebels. *Tapti Roy* too points out incident where Laxmi Bai accepted leadership after she received death threats from rebels.

Here it is important to mention *Eric Stokes* who in his '*Peasant and The Raj: Studies in Peasant Society and Agrarian Revolt in Colonial India*' stated revolt as 'peasant army breaking loose from foreign master'. Although in his earlier works he defined revolt as 'elite' but later changed his position. He pointed out how impact of revolt differed in each area and also pointed out which groups joined the revolt and why. He pointed out that caste and class played a very important role in revolt.

Importance of caste during revolt has also been pointed out by *Rudrangshu Mukherjee* in his detailed study on Awadh and by *Tapti Roy* in her detailed study on Bundelkhand. According to Rudrangshu dispossession of taluqdars after annexation of Awadh in 1856 made them connected to the grievances of peasants. According to him 'theirs was not a struggle to establish a new social order. British rule has turned their world topsy turvy, their aim was to restore that world.' *Tapti Roy* in her study states that peasants attacked British symbol of power including money lenders.

From the 1990s there has been attempt to study popular dimensions of 1857. Scholars like *KS Singh* has focussed on participation of adivasis in the revolt while *Badri Narayan* has focussed on in his research focussed on lower and outcastes during revolt. Thus attempts have been made in historiography to include sections which has always been ignored.

Here it becomes important to mention '**subaltern**' school which made the first attempt to include 'inferior' class in historiography. *Ranajit Guha* the general editor of '*Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society (1982)*' mentions in its introduction that for a very long time Indian historiography was dominated by 'elitism'-colonialist and bourgeois national elitism. According to him there is a need to focus on 'politics of people'-the subaltern classes and people consisting of labouring population and intermediate strata. *Ranajit Guha* points out that the colonial rule led to 'revitalisation of landlordism' which oppressed peasantry leading to recurrent revolts (like Santhal and Bhils revolt in 1855 and 1852 respectively) which formed the background of revolt of 1857.

In recent historiographies on the nature of revolt, a major contribution has been done by *Rajat Kanta Ray*. In his '*The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*', *Ray* sees 'mutiny' as war of the 'races' that was not a 'race war'. The revolt according to *Ray* was not against any religion but rather against policies of British. According to him, it was patriotic war of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood but not a 'national' war.

Now the attempts have been made to include sources which were missing from earlier historiography. These include urdu newspapers, study on tribal communities of Chotanagpur, dalit and dalit women. Inclusion of these topics will further widen the area of research.

CONCLUSION:

Thus we see that over the years there has been a shift in focus in historiography on nature of revolt. From being labelled as 'sepoy mutiny' by imperialist and 'national war of independence' by nationalists to inclusion of 'subaltern' classes in historiography there has been a change in perspective of scholars. Due to different causes in different areas, the nature of revolt is highly contested. While participation of sepoys in revolt in areas like Meerut and Barrackpore made historians call it 'mutiny', participation of taluqdars in areas like Awadh on the other hand gave revolt 'elite' character. Therefore, the nature of revolt cannot be standardized as it differed from region to region. What makes this revolt different from earlier uprisings is that this revolt connected more and more people. Unlike earlier uprisings which remained localised, the revolt of 1857 went beyond 'ilaqa' and bound rebels across the areas against British rule.

The revolt of 1857 holds an important place in Indian history as it led to the establishment of more conservative British rule leading to rise of nationalism among natives. As *Bernard Cohn* says, with setting up of British monarch, the British who were 'outsiders' became 'insiders'.

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