

'The 1857 uprising involved many groups with diverse grievances.' D

The 1857 uprising was perhaps the most serious of all threats to the British Empire, coming in the middle of a century which was to become its zenith as the most powerful empire in modern history. The event itself was highly controversial and still remains a sore point in India today, not least due to the number of ideological, sociological and economical re-interpretations of the whole process appearing thanks to the opening of Indian archives in 1947.¹ This however often presents the reader with problems in that the different interpretations of causes and events present a very inconsistent view of the roles of the various groupings involved. This has led to historians, particularly Marxists to formulate some kind of ideology to the whole rebellion, linking it in with the transformation of the traditional Indian economy into that of a colonial economy, i.e. the mass export of raw materials to fuel the central (British) industries. The renewed research into the uprising, or as it was referred to prior as 'the mutiny,' has also led to the belief that it was simply more than a rebellion, but rather a war of independence.

First expressed by the Indian historian V.D Sarkar in 1909, this idea still remains popular today with socialist and Marxist schools of thought. However, what is clear is that ideas of the uprising have moved on from it being simply referred to as a 'sepoy mutiny,' as was commonly believed prior to Sarkar. Historians tend to be much more pluralistic when looking at the participants in the rebellion, taking in the wider picture and looking carefully at the socio-economic context of India in 1857 and the road leading to it. Clearly this period was a crunch point where many Indian groups had grievances that were both long standing and entrenched in society, or recent antagonisms resulting from the gradual erosion of traditional Indian society through contentious legislation in the early 19th century.

First of all it needs to be established that the 1857 uprising should not be seen as a wholly unique event insofar as the fact that various rebellions from all quarters of Indian society were not infrequent in the early years of British rule in India. The main catalyst for the 1857 rebellion was the army in India, more specifically the Bengal presidency army, the reasons for which will be gone into later. The point that must be highlighted here is that although there were specific triggers for the revolt in May 1857, mutinies had happened on many occasions previously in the history of Indian army. Ironically most examples of mutiny come from the two sections of the army that stayed loyal to the British in 1857, the Madras and Bombay armies. This in turn will help explain how the grievances of the Bengal army interlinked with

¹ D. Domin, *India, A Study in the Role of the Sikhs in the People's Uprising in 1857-59* (Akademie Verlag 1977) p.7

general grievances in northern India as a whole. For example, the Madras army mutinied sporadically in the 1780's due to arrears of pay and the encroachment of the East India Company (EIC) into Arcot in the south of India. Furthermore in the summer of 1806, a serious mutiny at Vellore resulted in several hundred Indian and British deaths before order was eventually restored. It was generally considered that the Bengal army was the most loyal of the three Indian armies and signs of discontent did not appear until 1815. It was only during the Afghan campaign of 1839-42, that the British had serious problems.

The important thing to emphasise here though is that the Indian armies were not an entirely cohesive body of troops. Each of the three sections differed in size and composition from the others and this was to prove a crucial factor in the outbreak of hostilities.

Table indicating the size and composition of the Indian armies

	European	Native	Total
Bengal Army	22,688	118,663	141,351
Madras Army	10,194	49,737	59,931
Bombay Army	9,589	30,940	40,529
Grand Total	42,471	199,340	241,811

Taken from D. Dornin, *ibid*, p.119

Since the rebellion was most pronounced in the Bengal army, it is perhaps wise to consider some of their long-standing grievances with their British masters. The majority of the soldiers in the Bengal army were Brahmin or Rajput Hindus, with many coming from the recently annexed province of Oudh in the north. They prided themselves on being tough fighters and it was considered an honour to serve in the army. After the annexation of Oudh in 1856, the British campaign in the north was complete and active service for the sepoy became limited. Instead they were confined to battalion duties, which led them to become increasingly disgruntled. This was fuelled by additional grievances including the introduction of new uncomfortable uniforms, unsatisfactory pay which hadn't changed since 1800, slow and ineffective promotion, bad living conditions and the *laissez-faire* attitude of their white officers who were often away from India to help in other sub-continental colonial campaigns.² The trigger to the revolt, which then proceeded to spread through the whole of north India, was the supposed *deliberate* attempt of defiling the Hindu and Muslim sepoy troops through the use of new cartridges for the standard Lee Enfield rifles, which contained cow and pig fat. This was preceded by a decision taken by the previous governor general Lord Dalhousie, to establish a battalion in Burma, which in turn required the sepoy to serve 'over the sea,' thus defiling them according to Hindu thought at the time. The problem was exacerbated when the

² Lecture notes, HSI055, *The British Conquest of India 1757-1858*, 2003

British started to recruit northern Sikhs who did not object to serving overseas, thus diluting the influence and prestige of the Hindus.³

The initial mutiny happened in Meerut in May 1857, where the soldiers attacked the British in the local military base killing all officers they found. They then proceeded onto Delhi, the seat of the Mughal Emperor and started a wholesale murder spree of Christians, forcing many Britons to flee the city in panic to armoured British garrisons.

Their fears of defilement were not altogether recent in that they linked with long-standing fears of caste destruction. Tensions had arisen in the years prior to the rebellion due to the discovery that food prepared for the Hindu sepoy in the presidencies was done so by non followers of the faith, thus 'contaminating' the food. It was not only seen as insensitive by the soldiers but also as an experimental process towards the destruction of Hindu caste throughout the country. Although this fact is largely undisputed by the majority of modern scholars on the subject, they do find it hard to attribute the 1857-58 rebellion solely to it and those who see the rebellion as a concerted attempt to throw off British rule use this to explain some sort of rising national consciousness. The geographical area of the revolt was relatively confined to the north of the country in the area known as Hindustan.⁴ but the scale of the revolt in Bengal was very limited. If the fear of caste destruction was so strong then surely the large Hindu population of this area would have been central to the rebellion, but this was not so. The Hindus in Bengal were among the most loyal to the British especially the rising bourgeoisie, who were Western educated and relied upon the industrial expertise of the British to secure their own interests? This allows us to look at other grievances that the sepoy and Hindus in general felt they suffered from at the hands of the British and how this allied them to the increasingly disgruntled Muslims to form a more united force for rebellion.

Already we see that the problems of the sepoy were linked to those of the northern Hindus in religious terms, but they were also in terms of socio-economic and political factors. This side of the debate is the one favoured by the Marxists and it is useful to look at the province of Oudh and see how its annexation amounted to increased tension. As already stated the majority of soldiers in the Bengal army came from the Rajputs and Brahmins of the north, of which many were resident in the state of Oudh. From official figures it can be seen that two thirds of the Bengal army personnel were from Oudh, while one in ten soldiers from the state

³ W.H. Moreland, *Short History of India, Second edition*, (Longman, 1945) p.367

⁴ D. Hardiman, *Peasant resistance in India 1858-1914*, (OUP 1992) p.67

⁵ Dornin, *ibid*, p.22

served in two of the other presidency armies.⁶ It is clear therefore that the armies relied upon the loyalty and goodwill of the people from this state and in previous years, recruits from Oudh were granted a degree of prestige in their home state due to their connection with the British forces. For example, Oudh soldiers were allowed to submit petitions for legal redress through the British Resident. These were most often used by retired soldiers who could submit petitions on land issues, thus becoming landowners when they left the army. Although this was a grand privilege it often led to abuses, where ex-soldiers used the threat of appeal to the resident to frighten off any opponents or allowing friends and family to use their name in disputes. Prior to the annexation, these petitions were dealt with on the highest authority, as it was important, while Oudh was still independent of the British, to keep on good terms with its population and its chief source of dedicated troops. After however and when the privilege was removed, the people of Oudh saw that the British were taking the loyalty of the soldiers for granted, so not only was the annexation seen as illegal, but also incredibly insensitive and arbitrary. This was a huge attack on the pride of both Muslims and Hindus and united them in a common grievance against the British. The King of Oudh and his family were paid off and sent to live in Calcutta, which was seen by the people as extremely harsh and illegal treatment of a king who had done them and the British no wrong, which fuelled Muslim anger in particular.

Further to the political grievances of the people of Oudh was the way that their home state had been gradually eroded economically by the British, which inevitably drew them closer into its sphere of influence. Prior to the complete annexation, it can be said that the rulers of Oudh were living on borrowed time since they were heavily reliant on the support of the EIC both militarily and politically. This more than anything saw an increase in the amount of money paid to the Company in order to firmly secure that support. In the overall period from 1764 to 1858 the Company had extracted (in cash), 6,000,000Rs in various penalties (including costs incurred during leadership quests), 5,200,000Rs in low interest loans, and up to 100,000,000Rs for troop subsidies (i.e. the cost of stationing Company troops in the region).⁷ It was eventually the inability of Oudh to keep up with the payments for what were known as the subsidiary treaties, which prompted Britain to annex the area. Underlying the general economic decline of Oudh was the undisputed fact that the province had, since the turn of the nineteenth century, been slowly transformed to facilitate the changing nature of the British trading pattern in India. What we may call a colonial economy emerged in Oudh,

⁶ Lt. Gen. S.L. Menezes, *Fidelity and Honour, The Indian Army from the Seventeenth to Twenty-first Century*, (OUP 1999) p.151

⁷ M.H. Fisher, *Awadh and the East India Company*, Taken from: Violette Graff (ed), *Lucknow: Memories of a City*, (OUP, 1999) p.37

drastically affecting the agricultural structure in the region and antagonising landowners and peasant classes alike, giving them the incentive to throw of British control. This is another view favoured by Marxist historians and they point to the increase in export trade from the Bengal region as the main cause of the change in Oudh agriculture.

The East India Company had gradually been penetrating Oudh since about the early 1760's. By 1772 as one historian puts it, 'gradual economic penetration was moving hand in hand with growing political control,' which meant that by the turn of the nineteenth century the central thrust of industrial development in Oudh was being controlled by Europeans. Originally the presence of the Europeans and especially the British in the region was for trade in finished goods; either cotton piecegoods or finished craft goods. However as the political control increased, the trading patterns of the EIC shifted from exporting finished goods to exporting raw materials such as cotton, sugar and indigo.⁸ This had a two-pronged effect for the population.

Firstly it resulted in a massive reduction in the workload of the traditional weavers of the region who suddenly found themselves unable to make ends meet and were forced into land labour or into factories on very low pay. Secondly it united the peasant classes and the Oudh zamindari in a common grievance against the British who were slowly swallowing up their territory. The crucial raw materials which came from this area were important to the British textile industries and as always, in order to predict what their profits would be so spending could be projected, guarantees of price needed to be met. This in effect meant that political control was needed to guarantee that the planters would produce the crop punctually and to a suitable price.⁹ Suddenly Europeans were becoming actual landowners in Oudh, a situation that had never happened before, and for the landed people it was a severe blow. These feelings of betrayal were fuelled somewhat by the choice of crops that the EIC needed, which in the case of indigo was a very labour intensive crop and allowed no scope for diversification, meaning the planter could no longer rely on subsistence farming to supplement the income he received from the Company or other buyers. The demand for indigo was also subject to a volatile and unpredictable market, which gave way to long periods of stagnation in demand for the crop, meaning that the planters were again left short as they had nothing else to put on the market. This resulted in the need for less land labourers and less work in general.”

⁸ R. Mukerjee, *Trade and Empire in Awadh*, Taken from, *Past & Present no. 94*, p.88, 1982

⁹ Mukherjee, *ibid*, p.90

^{k)} C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the making of the British Empire*, (CUP 1988) p.157

So from the one example of Oudh, we can see how a combination of insensitivity, complacency, desire for export raw materials, forced economic dependence and a general lack of understanding about the mindset of the population led the British to estrange pretty much the whole social spectrum of Oudh's population. The one class which it may be thought did benefit was the rising Indian middle classes who had money to invest in economic ventures. It could be said that at the time, sensible investment would produce a worthwhile return, and certainly the EIC shareholders in London were not complaining. However, investment opportunities for the Indian bourgeoisie were placed on an unfair footing when compared to the investment opportunities for Europeans. The ventures most likely to produce the biggest return were modern introductions such as the building of roads and railways, which through a fee system could pay for themselves. The ability to invest in these however was reserved for the large part to Europeans, and the Indians were forced to invest in more speculative ventures such as agriculture."

Finally it is worth considering the effect that British rule had upon the traditional elites in the areas where the rebellion was most potent, the Brahmin Pandits. They were considered by the British to be the guardians of the golden past that India had left behind, and relied upon their acquiescence in the early years of their control in Bengal. With their help, British had begun to understand more fully the people over whom they had to govern and discovered a wide range of Indian literature and culture, which went a long way to dispelling the idea of the 'barbaric continent.' Sir John Kaye in one of the earliest full accounts of the uprising suggests that advances in technology brought to India by the British made the Indian population sceptical of their own industrial elites. This in turn angered the Brahmins who promised prosperity and industrial advances to the people but on quasi-religious lines rather than undeniable scientific fact. It seemed to the people that the Brahmins were failing and being made to look inferior, so according to this idea it is unsurprising that the rebellion found much support among the elites.¹² This is most probably best illustrated in how quickly the initial mutiny spread to Delhi, where many of the elites resided.

In conclusion therefore it can clearly be said that the uprising did contain many different groups with different grievances and here the best has been done to shed light on who and what these were. In addition we have seen how many of the grievances are intertwined with one another and an overall common grievance can be pinpointed - the increasing degree to which the British were taking too much for granted in India and the way that they bullied

" Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, (CUP 1999) p.57

¹² J. Kaye, *Kaye and Malleon 's History of the Indian Mutiny, The Administration of Lord Dalhousie*, (London 1888) p.138

various high profile individuals such as local rulers into obscure agreements and spurious 'deals,' while wielding the power of economic superiority as a guarantor for their co-operation. Whether this constitutes a war of independence is another question entirely and requires a study in more depth since it is quite a big step to convert the common grievances of the rebels into a form of national self-determination, especially when the population of the country as a whole is not fully considered.

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