

## **1857: Reconstruction of History**

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### ***Abstract***

*One hundred and fifty one years have passed since the first war of Indian independence. It was an important event in the history of freedom struggle against British rule. Nations write and rewrite their history in order to create historical consciousness among people. The task of historians becomes difficult if the past is distorted and fractured as a result of some dominant political historical interpretation. In this case, they have to retrieve the lost past and reconstruct it on the basis of fresh evidence. With the passage of time number of new documents and sources have been published on 1857. They brought in to light new facts about the event which has greatly changed the perspective of historians. Of course, during British rule, historians were not allowed to write anything against the colonial view point about 1857. The British administrators and journalists, on the other hand, were allowed to fully described the atrocities committed by the Indians and suffering of the Europeans during the crisis. They popularized the term 'mutiny' or ghadar for the rebellion.*

History is generally written by the victor and not by vanquished and the defeat of a nation is not only in the battlefield but also in the field of historiography. The conquering party makes attempts to silence the conquered and asserts its own point of view to prevail. Deprived of a memory, the defeated people lose their past and start believing in the version offered by their adversaries. This happened in 1857 when the Indian rebellion was crushed and nobody was allowed to say, write, or utter a word against the British actions. Now 150 years later when the historians of the Indian subcontinent are trying to reconstruct the history of their struggle, getting the proper historical material is not easy. Nearly, all historical sources on this event were written by the British diplomats, bureaucrats, army officers, journalists and historians. This information was preserved in the form of letters, diaries, dispatches, official documents articles and narratives. How to glean the material that

shows the Indians in a favourable light is a difficult exercise. However, these existing sources provide evidence how the British themselves behaved after the victory. Some of the army officers gleefully wrote to their families how they killed, hanged, and blew up the rebels in revenge. There are also testimonies of the so called war criminals' trials and court proceedings where one can find material regarding the charges and punishments. The letters and reports written by the native spies while Delhi was under siege give valuable information about the ongoing struggle of the rebels and how the spies were informing the British about their activities. There are also photographs and sketches in which one can see the scenes of battles and hanging of the rebels on trees or hurriedly built gallows. All British writers asserted their point of view that it was a mutiny against their legal and legitimate government.

To strengthen their point of view, the British government asked some Indians to write the account of mutiny in their favour and condemn the rebels and their actions. A number of *roznamche* or diaries were written by those Indians who were in the service of the East India Company such as Jewan Lal, Moinuddin Ahsan Khan, Abdul Latif, and Sayyid Mubarak Shah. Kanniyah wrote *Maharbai-i-Azim* (The Great Conflict) in which he describes the brutalities of the rebels and how the English men, women and children suffered at their hands? Sir Syed's *Tarikh-i-Sarkashi-i-Bijnor* (History of the Rebellion of Bijnor) condemns the activities of the rebels. He uses abusive and derogative language against them.

The image of rebels which is created by these writings is that they were uncivilized, uncultured, bandits, miscreants, criminals and rogues who revolted against a government which was a civilized, cultured, and peaceful custodian of law and order. Therefore, the treatment of rebels against the British was shameful and condemnable because all their actions were illegal and in violation of the law. What the British government did against the rebels was justifiable as the British were dealing with the criminals and traitors. Hence their hanging, killing, imprisonment, being blown up by cannon and confiscating their properties was lawful. These punishments were according to law and the motive was to deter any rebellion in future.

## Memorials

It is customary for the conquering powers to erect memorials in honour of their victory. The British government, after crushing the rebellion, built memorials of their war heroes and those who were killed by the hands of the rebels. One such memorial was the well of Kanpur where the bodies of English men, women, and children were thrown in. A

statue of a weeping angel was erected outside it to make it a sacred place. So, it became a shrine for the European visitors who paid homage to the victims of rebellion. No Indian was allowed to visit this place. Another well which became a memorial was in Ijnala, in East Punjab, where the British had thrown the bodies of the rebels who were killed during the war. It was officially known as 'the well of miscreant rebels'.<sup>1</sup> Kanpur well was remembered as a sign of respect while Ijnala well was designed as a warning to the Indians. Memorials were also built on the graves of those British generals and commanders who had died during the conflict. The Lucknow Residency was kept intact as it was bombarded by the rebels. Symbolically it shows the bravery, perseverance and the courage of those who had faced the rebels' onslaught but had survived.

On the other hand, there were no memorials of the Indians who had died during the war as the British authorities had attempted to wipe out all traces of rebel leaders and their graves. When Bahadur Shah Zafar died in Rangoon his grave was leveled to the ground in order to leave no trace of it. Later on the Muslim community of Rangoon built his tomb. Hazrat Mahal, who took refuge in Nepal after her defeat and died there has no memorial in India to remember her role in the war. Her tomb is in Kathmandu and remains totally unnoticed. When Maulvi Ahmadullah was killed by the Raja of Puin, his head was cut off and shown around by the British authorities. Later this headless body was buried near a small mosque of district Jahanganj.<sup>2</sup> Nana Sahib, Rani of Jhansi, Tatiya Tope, Azimulla, Mangal Pandey, Kunwar Singh, Maddow Gulab Singh and other Indian heroes remained without any memorials. Recently, the British government spent a considerable amount of money on the repair of Nicolson's tomb in Delhi. A sign not to remember the heroes but to assert the British point of view regarding 1857.

There is a realization now on the part of the Indian government that memorials of the Indians who fought in the 1857 rebellion should be built to remind the people of their sacrifices for the cause of independence. The Indian authorities replaced the statue of the weeping angel from the Kanpur well and instead erected the statue of Tatiya Tope. Though some roads are named on the rebel leaders but still there is need to build and erect memorials of those who fought and sacrificed but lost. Their memories should be retrieved from the past. Memorials should also be built in those military camps where sepoys were hanged and blown up by cannons. In parts of India that were later to become

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<sup>1</sup> Ghulam Rasul Mahar, *Eighteen fifty seven aur Punjab* (1857 and Punjab), Akram Chughtai (ed.), Lahore, 2007, p.559.

<sup>2</sup> Waseem Ahmad, Ahmadullah Shah, *Aiwan i Urdu*, May 2007, p.14.

Pakistan, sepoys' rebellions were put down in the army camps whose traces no more exist. But in memory of shared struggle, a memorial of 1857 should be built as part of our history.

Other sources of the events are photographs and sketches. Felice Beato, a British photographer, took a number of photos during the war and in its aftermath. These photos show hangings of the rebels and how mercilessly they were blown up by cannons. There are also a number of sketches of battle scenes and the arrogant faces of the British offices.

### Discovery of history

Once history is lost or distorted and its sources are wiped out it becomes difficult to collect material and reconstruct its missing link. However, after independence, historians of Indian subcontinent attempted to trace the history of 1857 and rewrite it with the nationalistic point of view. First of all, they tried to collect material from the British sources concerning the policy regarding the rebellion. There are a number of cases in which British writers recount how they treated the Indians, burned their villages, hanged people on the slightest suspicion, shot them without any investigation, humiliated them by smearing pig and cow fat on the bodies of the Muslims and the Hindus, and insulted them while pronouncing death sentences. All such cases are collected to prove the brutal treatment and callousness of the British army.

Another important source is the Indian newspapers. During the war these newspapers were free to publish pro-rebel news and statements. For example, Maulvi Baqar's *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* supported the rebels' cause and encouraged them to fight against the foreigners. It continued to publish news of other cities where the rebellion had broken out. His son Muhammad Hussain Azad wrote a poem against the Company and its misrule. Another newspaper was *Sadiqul Akhbar*, whose editor was Jamiluddin Hijr. This newspaper also provided information about the news of rebellion to the readers. It published Bahadur Shah Zafar's poetry against the British. It also published the combined *fatwa* of the *ulema* which declared holy war against the infidels. The third newspaper was *Payam-i-Azadi* whose editor was Mirza Bidar Bakht, the grandson of the Mughal king. It was assisted by Azimullah, a close companion of Nana Sahib. He published one of his famous poems in the newspaper in which he exhorted Indians to fight against the *farangis* for the freedom of their homeland. Besides Urdu, the Persian newspapers such as *Gukshan i Nobahar*, *Sultanul Akhbar*, and *Sirajul Akhbar* regularly published news during the war.

There were a number of pamphlets, posters, and declarations, *framing* of the king asking the people to get united to fight against the foreign rulers.

Zahir Dehlavi in his book *Dastan-i-Ghadr* (Story of the Mutiny) beautifully portrays the social and cultural life of Delhi before the rebellion and then how everything had changed when the rebel army came to the city. He also narrates in detail the plight of the city's inhabitants when they were robbed, killed and expelled from the city. It is a moving story of those who lost their family members and were deprived of their homes and properties, wandering from place to place for refuge. He writes: 'the victorious English army started to loot the houses. If they found an empty house they robbed it within minutes; if they found somebody there, they shot him without any hesitation. In one mohallah (locality), 140 people were arrested and brought to Rajghat where all of them were shot dead and their bodies were thrown in the river. As far as women were concerned, they came out from their houses along with children and jumped in wells. All wells of *Kucha i Chillan* were filled by their dead bodies.' He concludes: '...my pen cannot move any further.'<sup>3</sup>

Delhi was the center of cultural activities and its destruction brought gloom and despondency to its residents. Mirza Ghalib in his letters to his friends lamented the devastation of the city. Among the poets who wrote elegies of the city are Ghalib, Hali, Mir Dagh, Sadruddin Azurda, Zaheer Dehlavi, Mirza Qurban Ali Beg Salik, Muneer Shukohabadi, and Mir Mahdi Majroh. From their poetry one can sense the sadness which prevailed in India after the rebellion.

The defeat broke the hearts of the Indians as their leaders were either killed or hanged or had left in exile. The British triumph was supreme. There were folk songs and stories which spread rapidly all over the country. P.C Joshi has compiled these folk songs in one of his articles. They are moving songs which were composed and sung by common people. A folk song describes the insurrection of Meerut:

*Oh, come and look!*

*In the Bazaar of Meerut*

*The Firingi is waylaid and beaten!*

*The Whiteman is waylaid and beaten!*

*In the open Bazaar of Meerut*

*Look, oh look, (he is beaten) His gun is snatched*

*His horse lies dead*

*His revolver is battered.*

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<sup>3</sup> Zaheer Dahlawi, *Dastan-i-Ghadr* (Story of Mutiny), Lahore, 2003, p.22-3.

*In the open Bazaar of Meerut<sup>4</sup>*

There are a number of songs for the Rani of Jhansi. One song describes how 'she fought bravely like a man, oh, Rani of Jhansi (*khub lari mardani, ari Jhansi wali rani*). There are also songs about Kunwar Singh, Rana Bini Madow, Tatiya Tope, Gulab Singh, and Hazrat Mahal. These songs praised those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of independence. There is hatred and condemnation for the British rule. They express the popular feelings of the people. Though the Indians were defeated militarily and politically, these songs converted the defeat into victory and kept the memories of the rebels alive. It is said that at that time people had no concept of nationhood but these songs indicate that they fully realized the difference between their own rulers and the foreign domination. Their loyalties were with the local leaders and not with the British.

Later on Khwaja Hassan Nizami and Rashidul Khairi collected material on 1857 which, after interviewing the survivors, narrated their stories. They depict a society which had lost its fabric and whose world had gone upside down as a result of the rebellion's failure.

Since independence, historians of the Indian subcontinent are working on 1857. In 1957, at the time of the centenary year celebrations a number of books were published, presenting Indian point of view. Recently, in 2007, on the occasion of 150 years of its memory a number of books and articles bring to light the forgotten aspects of the event. The Indian actor and film-maker Sohrab Modi produced an excellent movie on the Rani of Jhansi in 1950s. Recently a film on Mangal Pandey by Aamir Khan, though not fully correct from historical point of view, depicts people's sentiments against the foreign *raj*.

Recently, historians are linking 1857 as resistance against imperialism and racialism and how India suffered as a result of these. The war of 1857 was more than a military revolt. It was a response to social, cultural, religious, political and economic domination. The history which was lost is in a process of discovery. The British domination of historiography is ending.

### **1857: Was it for the revival of the Mughal empire?**

There are groups who believe that in 1857 an attempt was made to revive the Mughal empire. This is not correct. Politically the empire had already collapsed and had no energy to revive its past glory. The Mughal king was symbolically the head but had no power to assert his authority. He

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<sup>4</sup> P.C. Joshi, 'Folk Song on 1857', in *Rebellion 1857* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 2007), pp.292-309.

was once under the Marathas who paid for his expenses. Then he came under the East India Company and received an annual stipend from it. However, the long period of Mughal rule legitimized his position and people of India had deep respect for him. Though his rule was confined within the Red Fort, he kept the centuries-old court etiquette intact. This made the Fort a social and cultural symbol.

When the rebel sepoys came to Delhi and sought the emperor's blessings, their motive was to legitimize their rebellion against the Company whose rule was not legal and who had usurped the power by force and through intrigues. After accepting the leadership of the emperor, the rebel army used it as a propaganda against the Company as a foreign rule which should be ended. However, these soldiers were not well-equipped to observe the court etiquette and violated them without any concern. They roamed around the fort on the horses and addressed the emperor, without any title, in a rude manner. This annoyed the courtiers who looked down upon them as boorish and uncultured. Zaheer Dahlavi writes that one day a person wearing an ordinary attire came in the presence of the king and, after holding his hand, told him: 'listen, old man. We have made you the king'.<sup>5</sup> He was Bakht Khan, the commander of the rebels. He annoyed the courtiers who were not accustomed to such behaviour in the presence of the king. It also shocked the king who in spite of his weaknesses was not prepared to be addressed in such a way. However, Bakht Khan's behaviour was tolerated because the rebels were in power.

The rebels used the king for their interest and issued orders with his seal and signature for the maintenance of peace and order in the city. They fixed the prices of commodities, assured the shopkeepers and merchants that their properties would be protected. At the time of his trial Bahadur Shah Zafar admitted that he was helpless before the rebels who had forced him to put his signature on the documents which they had drafted without his consent.

Tilmiz Khaldun in his article 'The Great Rebellion' describes in detail the organization of different councils which were set up after the arrival of Bakht Khan. Though Bahadur Shah Zafar was declared the emperor but real authority was vested in different councils whose task was to keep law and order, collect revenue, get loans from the moneylenders, and organize the army for war. After analyzing the working of these councils and the draft of the constitution which was prepared by Bakht Khan, one can easily draw the conclusion that the rebel army and its leader possessed a modern outlook and wanted to set

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<sup>5</sup> Zaheer Dehlawi, *op.cit.*, p.101.

up democratic institutions in India. There was no plan to revive the Mughal empire.<sup>6</sup>

### **Who were the rebels?**

The rebel sepoys belonged to the peasant class of north India and had consciousness of how the Company exploited them by charging high revenues. When rebellion broke out, the peasant had believed that this was the end of the Company's rule and had therefore joined the rebellion with a cause. The pattern of the peasants rebellions shows that they had full realization of their motives: They burnt the documents of the moneylenders and looted houses of those *zamindars* who had purchased properties in auction by depriving the old landlords of their lands. Moreover, they not only plundered the government property but also burnt it.<sup>7</sup> The traditional *zaminadars* and some rulers of the states supported them because they had their own grievances against the Company. However, on the other side, the majority of the native rulers and big feudal lords had supported the British government realizing that in the end the Company rule would prevail. To them, the peasants' rebellions were a dangerous threat to their own rule so they provided information to the British army and helped it in defeating the rebellions.

In Sindh and Punjab, the rebellion could not spread because the majority of the soldiers were from north of India and had no connection with the local populations. As soon as the government got the information about rebellion, it immediately ordered the sepoys to lay down their arms. Those who refused were arrested and put to death by hanging, shooting, or by cannon-fire. The insurrection remained confined only to the army camps. There were some small occurrences in far off places of Punjab which were easily crushed.

### **What were the results of 1957 rebellion?**

Though the uprising was crushed mercilessly and was followed by unprecedented revenge by the British, it nevertheless remains a part of the collective memory of the Indian nation. With the destruction of Delhi and Lucknow, two main centres of culture, literary and social activities came to an end as also ended the composite culture (*ganga-jumni tahzib*) which had brought Hindus and Muslims together. From here begins the slow and gradual rise of communalism which ultimately separated the two communities.

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<sup>6</sup> For detail see Tilmiz Khaldun 'The Great Rebellion', in P.C. Joshi, pp.3-77.

<sup>7</sup> P.C. Joshi, *op.cit.*, pp.155-63 .



Following the end of the uprising the Indian leadership realized that the right method to liberate themselves from foreign rule was not through armed struggle but through newly created political parties, in an organized and constitutional manner. This struggle was based on the concept of nationalism. Despite this the spirit of resistance and the consciousness against foreign rule engendered by the 1857 uprising cannot be ignored. The rebels were defeated in their own lifetime but their struggle to liberate the country finally succeeded in 1947.