



Capture of Bahadur Shah Zafar and his sons by William Hodson at Humayun's tomb on 20 September 1857.



Troops of the Native Allies. Painting by George Francklin Atkinson, 1859. Courtesy; Wikimedia Commons.

# 1857: The Uprising in Delhi and Its Brutal Suppression

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The great revolt of 1857 was a momentous struggle against colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent—the most widespread anti-colonial struggle during the nineteenth century. It began in the second week of May and soon encompassed large parts of northern, central and eastern India. Several hundred thousand subjects of the British Indian empire were killed during the revolt. Whereas the British managed to restore their authority in most of the areas where the uprising took place, the final operations continued till the beginning of 1859. The upheaval of 1857-59 was not an isolated event. It was part of a long tradition of resistance to the East India Company (EIC). The revolt must be regarded as a significant phase in this continuous struggle against colonial exploitation.

In the historiography of the great revolt, the output of published material from the British perspective was so voluminous during the latter half of the nineteenth century that for a long time the dominant colonial narrative of this upheaval remained unchallenged. Until the first decade of the twentieth century there was no major published work from the perspective of the colonized. This, however, is not surprising. Given the ruthlessness with which the revolt was crushed, and the repression that was unleashed by the colonial state in the post-1857 period, any attempt to glorify the revolt was out of the question.

The revolt had a pan-Indian character. What is usually overlooked in standard textbooks is that eastern and north-eastern areas of the subcontinent too were affected. The British were in the process of consolidating their position in the region from the 1820s onwards following a war against Burma (First

resistance. More than forty sipahis were killed in the confrontation between the rebels and the British, while others were killed when they were attempting to escape. Many of the remaining soldiers marched out of Dacca towards Mymensingh and Rangpur; some were captured while others found shelter in the foothills of Nepal. Unfortunately, the history of this resistance has not been adequately researched.

Accounts of the revolt began to appear as early as 1857-58, as for example, Charles Ball's *History of the Indian Mutiny*; George Malleson's *The Mutiny of the Bengal Army*; John Adye's *Defence of Cawnpore*; L.E.R. Rees's *A Personal Narrative of the Siege of Lucknow*; and Henry Mead's *The Sepoy Revolt: Its Causes and Consequences*. However, the foundations of colonial historiography on the revolt were laid by the immensely influential work of John W. Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India*. Kaye was a senior colonial official and a military historian. The first volume of *History of the Sepoy War* was published in 1864; two subsequent volumes appeared in 1870 and 1876 respectively. Kaye passed away in 1876, and the work remained unfinished.

While on the one hand the list of publications emanating from British authors grew progressively lengthy, there was on the other hand a prolonged, and for historians a painful, silence in India. However, this does not mean that the revolt had rapidly faded from local memory. There can be little doubt that memories of the revolt remained alive in the form of a robust oral tradition. We are referring here to the world of private conversation, the transmission of remembrances and lore about the revolt by word-of-mouth within an intimate circle. In the second

trauma and suffering which Indians had to undergo during and after the revolt. It needs to be mentioned that critical studies of the revolt, written by professional academics and based on serious archival research, only began appearing in the mid-1950s. The most significant of these pioneering works were *Eighteen Fifty-seven* by Surendranath Sen, S.B. Chaudhuri's *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies*, Syed Mahdi Husain's *Bahadur Shah Zafar and the War of 1857 in Delhi*, and *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium* edited by P.C. Joshi. These writings represented a shift away from colonial historiography on the revolt.

The revolt began as a mutiny in the EIC's Bengal Army, and soon turned into a popular uprising. The EIC's army had three components, namely,

rifle were lubricated with substances which were taboo. The cartridge was made of paper, and contained both powder and bullet; it had to be torn open and the contents loaded into the barrel from the front. After a preliminary enquiry the sawars who had refused to participate in the drill were put on trial and on 8 May were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for ten years. This punishment led to discontent among the soldiers and culminated in a mutiny on 10 May. The British were taken completely by surprise. J.A.B. Palmer's study, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut*, argues quite convincingly that British officers at Meerut had absolutely no idea of the intensity of the anger caused by the punishment of the soldiers. Palmer has pieced together most of the available evidence relating to the events of that day. The immediate objective of the

Delhi. They then succeeded in taking over the Ridge or hillock located north of the city.

The rebel administration found it increasingly difficult to function because it had hardly any access to resources. Wealthier sections of the city were unwilling to give money to them as they did not have sufficient confidence in the rebel leaders. At the same time the pressure of the British forces increased, and the defence of the city became the main priority.

The British force numbered around 6500. Throughout the summer months the British force remained stationed at the Ridge. Then in mid-September 1857 it carried out a major assault to capture the city. From the Ridge the (British) troops moved in the direction of the Kashmir Gate of the city. The gate was stormed and taken. The attack was led by John Nicholson who was wounded and died shortly afterwards. By 20 September 1857 the entire city had been taken over and the rebels were defeated. Then began a period of vicious large-scale massacre of the rebels and the ordinary people of Delhi. For about a week the troops killed able-bodied men indiscriminately. It is not possible to estimate the number of people killed in the first six days of the assault. But we do have some figures which give us an idea about the scale of the massacre. Nearly 1400 residents were massacred in just one locality—Kucha Chelan. The main target of course were the remaining rebel soldiers and the inhabitants of the Red Fort. However, sadistic brutality perpetrated on a mass scale as a matter of official policy resulted in the entire population of the walled city being driven out. The aged and the infirm, who had been unable to join the general exodus, too were evicted from the city by the orders of the military officials. Delhi was literally cleansed of all inhabitants. They were allowed to re-enter the city selectively in several phases after a few months, upon verification of their credentials.

By the beginning of 1858 colonial officials were considering various proposals for punishing Delhi. A proposal for razing the entire walled city to the ground, and erecting a grand memorial on the site, was under serious consideration though eventually abandoned. But large areas of the city were demolished, especially the zone adjoining the Red Fort. All buildings within a radius of 448 sq. yards were levelled. The densely populated area between the Fort and the Jama Masjid was also destroyed, resulting in large-scale dislocation of the residents of this part of the city—an important cultural and literary hub. There was also large-scale confiscation of property. Moreover, several prominent residents remained under house-arrest for several years after 1857-58.

Thus ended the revolt in the erstwhile Mughal capital, though the struggle continued in many other regions. In fact, some of the most intense fighting between the rebels and British forces took place in the first half of 1858 (Lucknow, Jhansi, Gwalior, Bareilly and Shahabad in Bihar). The suppression of the revolt was a major setback for the anti-colonial struggle, and it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the struggle could be resumed. For the time being the reconquest of the empire by Britain meant that the people of the subcontinent would have to endure colonial rule for another ninety years. However, the revolt remained an important source of inspiration for the freedom struggle.

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"The Sepoy revolt at Meerut", wood-engraving from the Illustrated London News, 1857.

the Bengal Army, Madras Army and Bombay Army. Soldiers for the Bengal Army were mainly recruited from the Ganga-Jamuna Doab. This had become the main fighting arm of the EIC by the early decades of the nineteenth century. The mutiny initially broke out at Meerut on Sunday, 10 May 1857. Meerut was a major cantonment. The rebel sipahis then marched to Delhi, where they arrived the next morning. They put an end to the Company's administration in Delhi (since 1803 the EIC had administered the city and its environs on behalf of the emperor). The sipahis assumed control of the walled city (Shahjahanabad) and its immediate outskirts without much resistance. They persuaded Bahadur Shah Zafar (r. 1837-1857), who at that time occupied the Mughal throne, to support their cause. In turn they affirmed their loyalty to the emperor. This was an indication of the symbolic importance of the Mughal emperor as the legitimate sovereign of most of the territories of the EIC. The Company too had reluctantly recognized the *de jure* authority of the Mughals, even though by the middle of the nineteenth century they had made the emperor completely powerless and irrelevant. Nevertheless, the sipahis were prompted by the popular perception of the Mughal emperor as sovereign when they proclaimed him their nominal leader. This was crucial for legitimizing their authority.

In the last week of April, eighty-five sawars belonging to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the Light Cavalry posted at Meerut had refused to take part in a practice drill that was intended to teach them how to load the newly introduced Enfield P53 rifle. The soldiers were apparently agitated over reports that the new cartridges supplied to them for the

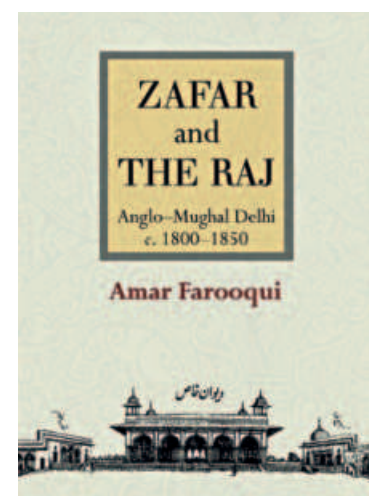
mutinous soldiers was the release of the imprisoned sipahis, in which they were successful. This was the month of Ramzan and it seems that the initial tumult took place in the regimental bazaar where some of the soldiers might have been making purchases for *iftar*, or might just have congregated in the bazaar shortly before *iftar*. The incidents began in the evening, and within a short time British authority collapsed both in the cantonment and the city.

The sipahis then marched to Delhi, where they arrived early next morning. Almost all the mutinous soldiers had departed from Meerut before midnight. It was assumed by the European officers, most of whom still remained within the cantonment, that the sipahis would disperse to the countryside and gradually make their way towards their homes. They were unaware of their movement on roads leading to Delhi. Consequently EIC officials in Delhi had no prior intimation about the approaching confrontation.

After the rebel soldiers had established their control over Delhi, and had proclaimed Bahadur Shah as the nominal head of their regime on 11 May, they set up a new administration in Delhi. Till the end of June, the main person who coordinated these efforts (including the major task of defending the city) was Mirza Mughal who was the eldest surviving son of Bahadur Shah. Subsequently the leadership of the rebels, and of the administration of Delhi, was taken over by Bakht Khan. Bakht Khan, an experienced 'native' officer in the artillery wing, arrived in Delhi at the beginning of July. The British had meanwhile launched a counter-offensive. On 6 June 1857 they had defeated a large force of the rebels at Badli-ki-Sarai, a short distance from



(L) The Flagstaff Tower, Delhi, where the British survivors of the rebellion gathered on 11 May 1857; photographed by Felice Beato (R) Cover of Amar Farooqui's book *Zafar and The Raj*



Burma War, 1824-26). A major uprising occurred in November 1857 when soldiers ('sepoys' or sipahis) stationed in Chittagong mutinied, attacked the jail and released prisoners, ransacked the government treasury, and set fire to the 'sepoys lines' (lodgings) in the cantonment. The rebels then marched northwards to Cachar via Sylhet and Tripura. They were able to enlist the support of some of the princes of the Manipur royal house, who had been living in Cachar since the 1830s. The British were able to put down the insurrection by the beginning of 1858. News of the events at Chittagong resulted in rumours about preparations for an uprising in Dacca. When the British authorities attempted to disarm Indian troops stationed in the city they met with

decade of the twentieth century Khwaja Hasan Nizami, *sajjadnamashin* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, embarked upon a project to publish popular tracts on the revolt, mainly relating to Delhi, many of them based on oral traditions. Hasan Nizami was a journalist and a prolific writer. He began publishing a series consisting of low-priced booklets on the theme of the revolt written in simple Urdu. Thirteen booklets were published as part of this series. Some of the titles are: *Begamats ke Aansu* ('Tears of the Begams', i.e., women of the royal family), *Dilli ki Akhri Shama* ('The Last Flicker of the Candle') and *Dilli ki Jankani* ('The Agony of Delhi'). Such writings were important for undermining the colonial narrative of the revolt as they preserved memories of the