THE FORGOTTEN FRONT

Rumour, resistance, and the Uprising of 1857 in Eastern Bengal

NILADRI CHATTERJEE

For over a century and a half, the collective memory and historiography of the 1857 uprising, variously termed the 'Sepoy Mutiny' or the 'First Indian War of Independence', have remained overwhelmingly anchored within the north-central Gangetic heartland of the Indian subcontinent. The canonical narratives of this subcontinental conflagration evoke the siege of Delhi, the bloody entrenchments of Kanpur, and the fierce resistance in Lucknow. Within this established historical framework, the lower provinces of the Bengal Presidency, and specifically Eastern Bengal (including present-day Bangladesh), have often been relegated to the margins. Imperial historians and early nationalist scholars alike, and even revisionist historians to a certain extent, stereotyped Eastern Bengal as a quiet, loyalist enclave, suggesting that the even tenor of life there remained largely undisturbed by the military and civil upheavals tearing through northern India.

However, careful research based on archival records, colonial correspondence, and local histories reveals a profoundly different reality. Contrary to the dominant scholarship, Eastern Bengal was not a passive spectator to the events of 1857. It was a highly volatile theatre of unrest, characterised by complex intersections of military mutiny, civilian conspiracies, pre-existing socio-religious resistance movements, and the paralysing yet electrifying transmission of rumour. As contemporary readers re-examine the historical records of colonial rule, reading relationally to uncover histories of silence and institutional prejudice, it becomes imperative to reconstruct and revisit this forgotten front of the 1857 rebellion.

The anatomy of the Bengal Army and the topography of discontent

To comprehend why the uprising in Eastern Bengal unfolded in its specific manner, one must first analyse the structural organisation and social origins of the Bengal Native Infantry. The East India Company's military apparatus in the Bengal Presidency was not built upon the local Bengali populace. Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the colonial administration deliberately eschewed the recruitment of the ex-Nawab's army, which was composed largely of urban-based Afghan and Pathan soldiers, deeming them politically unreliable. Instead, the Company tapped into the traditional military labour markets of the north-central Gangetic plains—specifically Awadh, Bihar, Rohilkhand, and the Doab region. Operating under nascent and racially charged 'martial race' theories, British officials posited that the inhabitants of the wheat-producing zones of northern India possessed superior physical attributes and a warrior ethos, in stark contrast to the rice-consuming inhabitants of the eastern provinces, whom colonial ideologues such as Thomas Babington Macaulay dismissed as effeminate and unsuited for military service.

Consequently, the Bengal Army evolved into a relatively homogenous body of high-caste Hindu peasants, primarily Brahmins, Bhumihars, and Rajputs, from the 'Purbia' (eastern) regions of northern India. This reliance on a non-local demographic had profound implications for Eastern Bengal in 1857. The sepoys stationed in the cantonments of Dhaka, Chittagong, and Jalpaiguri had no organic social, cultural, or familial ties to the local Bengali population. When the colonial government introduced the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856, requiring sepoys to serve overseas and thereby threatening their caste status, and annexed Awadh, the homeland of the majority of the soldiers, a deep sense of betrayal permeated the ranks. However, because the sepoys in Eastern Bengal operated in a demographic vacuum relative to their own origins, their mutinies did not spontaneously ignite mass agrarian rebellions in the way they did in Awadh. Their primary objective upon mutinying in and around the military cantonments of Bengal was not to establish a localised alternative government, but to plunder colonial treasuries, release prisoners, and march back to the Gangetic heartland to reinforce their brethren.

EASTERN BENGAL: A landscape of pre-existing discontent

To understand the volatility of Eastern Bengal in 1857, it is vital to recognise that the region was already a cauldron of anti-colonial and anti-feudal sentiment long before the sepoys voiced their grievances regarding greased cartridges. The first century of British rule had severely devastated the political and economic fortunes of the Muslim aristocracy and peasantry in Bengal. The Permanent Settlement of 1793, the resumption of rent-free grants, and the replacement of Persian with English in administrative courts systematically marginalised the Muslim population. Out of this economic and social degradation emerged powerful purist Islamic reform movements that fundamentally challenged the colonial order. The Wahabi movement, led in Bengal by the charismatic peasant leader Titu Mir in the 1830s, sought to purge Islam of syncretic practices but quickly evolved into a militant politico-economic struggle against oppressive Hindu zamindars, European indigo planters, and the British state. Titu Mir famously declared that the period of British rule had expired, demanding that revenues be paid directly to his parallel administration before he was ultimately killed in a full-scale military engagement with colonial forces.

Concurrently, the Faraizi movement, founded by Haji Shariatullah and subsequently led by his son Dudu Miyan, gained immense traction in the districts of Faridpur, Bakarganj, and Jessore. The Faraizis propagated the theological doctrine that, under British subjugation, India had become *Dar-ul-Harb* (the land of war), thereby suspending Friday congregational prayers. Dudu Miyan organised a highly structured parallel government, appointing village commissioners (*Khalifas*) to collect funds, settle disputes, and lead armed resistance against landlords.

When the rebellion of 1857 erupted, the colonial administration was gripped by the terrifying prospect that these deeply entrenched and highly organised agrarian movements would align with the heavily armed mutinous sepoys. Intelligence reports from Dhaka and Faridpur suggested that the Faraizis were holding secret meetings with Hindustani sepoys. A petition presented to the government stated explicitly that 'the Ferazees in a body were rising and had written to the sepoys for support'. Prompted by the sheer terror of a synchronised civil-military uprising, the colonial state pre-emptively arrested Dudu Miyan, incarcerating him in the Alipur Jail as a political prisoner for the duration of the conflict in order to sever his communication with the broader Faraizi network.

A view of the southern gate of Lalbagh Fort in 1875, nearly two decades after the fierce Battle of Lal Bagh during the Uprising of 1857.

THE JESSORE CONSPIRACY: Treason in the shadows

The pervasive tension in Eastern Bengal manifested itself distinctly in the district of Jessore, providing a critical case study of how disbanded military personnel and civil administrative structures became entangled in the rebellion. Unlike Dhaka or Chittagong, Jessore lacked a formal sepoy cantonment. However, it housed a detachment of Najibs—an irregular militia employed by the colonial state, primarily comprising retired or disbanded sepoys from the North-Western Provinces who had previously served in the Anglo-Sikh or Afghan wars in the 1840s. These Najibs were attached to the Dacoity Commission, an investigative body established to eradicate rural banditry using the controversial 'approver' system developed by W.H. Sleeman, superintendent of police for the Dacoity Commission, whereby captured criminals were offered pardons in exchange for testifying against their accomplices. Ironically, the very intelligence-gathering network designed to police the indigenous population became the incubator for a deep-seated conspiracy within its own ranks.

In July 1857, Baboo Guru Charan Dass, a senior Bengali official in the Dacoity establishment, reported that Jamadar Ram Singh, the head of the Najib guards, was engaging in highly treasonable correspondence. Ram Singh, a former *sowar* in Raja Ranjit Singh's bodyguard, had received communications from mutinous regiments in Barrackpore and Allahabad, urging him to mobilise his men. The Jamadar formulated a precise tactical plan: the Najibs were to murder the European officials, plunder the Collectorate treasury (which held ten thousand gold mohurs), set the local bazaar ablaze, release the prisoners from the jail, and march to Murshidabad to join the broader insurrection. Furthermore, Ram Singh openly predicted the imminent downfall of Company rule, asserting that the English would be expelled and Persian restored as the language of the courts.

The colonial response was swift and extrajudicial. The European civilians in Jessore transformed themselves into an impromptu militia, arresting Ram Singh and his co-conspirators. The Magistrate, E.W. Molony, utilised the psychological leverage of Sleeman's approver system, incarcerating the remaining Najibs until one of them—Bechu Singh—broke ranks and provided a full deposition detailing the plot. The subsequent trial highlighted the suspension of standard legal frameworks during the crisis. W.S. Seton-Karr, the Civil and Sessions Judge of the district of Jessore, was granted extraordinary powers by Governor-General Canning to conduct a summary trial without a jury. Seton-Karr presided over the court with loaded pistols at his side, acutely aware that words which might have been dismissed as idle talk in times of peace constituted high treason during a subcontinental rebellion. Ram Singh was sentenced to death. To maximise the psychological deterrence of the punishment, the execution was scheduled for a Monday morning, the busiest market day, at 'Tin Mohini' (the three crossroads). The spectacle of the Jamadar's corpse left hanging throughout the day was a visceral demonstration of colonial terror, intended to permanently crush the localised spirit of revolt.

A contemporary engraving depicting a scene from the Uprising of 1857 involving the Bengal Army.

COURTESY: **WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

THE CHITTAGONG UPRISING: Prisons, princes, and flight

As the autumn of 1857 approached, the latent tensions in the eastern extremities of the province finally fractured into open military rebellion. Chittagong, a vital port city handling extensive maritime trade across Southeast Asia, was garrisoned by the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th companies of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry. The remaining seven companies of this same regiment had already been ignominiously disbanded at Barrackpore following the iconic defiance of Mangal Pandey.

Initially, the detachments in Chittagong engaged in a complex performance of fidelity, submitting petitions to the Governor-General of India emphasising their loyalty and distancing themselves from their disgraced brethren. However, beneath this veneer of compliance, a potent undercurrent of rebellion was brewing, heavily influenced by rumours of forced religious conversions and continuous correspondence with mutineers in the North-Western Provinces of India. A pensioned Jamadar named Thakur Bax was suspected of maintaining close contact with the sepoys, fanning the flames of insurrection.

On the night of November 18, 1857, following a large feast at which final tactical manoeuvres were solidified, the sepoys in Chittagong initiated a full-scale mutiny. Their actions meticulously followed the established patterns of the popular uprisings. They plundered the district treasury, securing roughly three hundred thousand rupees, set their own military lines on fire, blew up the ammunition magazines, and, critically, broke open the colonial jail to release the prisoners. The systematic targeting of prisons during the rebellion was not merely a pragmatic effort to recruit labour or create chaos. Prisons were viscerally despised as the ultimate architectural embodiments of colonial intrusion, cultural transgression, and state hegemony. By dismantling the jail, the Chittagong mutineers were symbolically dismantling the authority of the East India Company. Interestingly, the mutiny in Chittagong was virtually bloodless in terms of European casualties, focusing instead on the expropriation of state resources and the destruction of colonial infrastructure.

Following the outbreak, the mutineers embarked on a strategic retreat into the independent princely state of Tripura, seeking to bypass colonial strongholds and eventually link up with rebel forces in northern India. Their movement through the dense topography of the North-East Frontier revealed the extent of covert indigenous support for the rebellion. Colonial intelligence grudgingly acknowledged that more than 1,200 local civilians assisted the mutineers by cutting jungle paths and procuring provisions.

Furthermore, the mutineers forged formidable alliances with indigenous political factions. They were joined by rebel princes of the Manipur royal family, notably Narendrajit Singh, who broke out of colonial detention in Cachar to align his followers with the sepoys. The rebels also received critical logistical support from the Kookie hill tribes. This complex coalition of Hindustani sepoys, Manipuri royalty, and indigenous tribesmen engaged in a fierce three-hour firefight with British forces at present-day Jiribam in Manipur. Although the sepoys were ultimately defeated and scattered into the forests, with many subsequently captured and later executed, the Chittagong outbreak proved that the rebellion in the periphery was capable of forging powerful cross-cultural anti-colonial alliances. The Chittagong uprising also had a somewhat unanticipated impact on Dhaka.

BATTLE OF LAL BAGH: The Dhaka Uprising

News of the Chittagong mutiny traversed the regional communication networks with astonishing speed, reaching the administrative hub of Dhaka on November 21, 1857. Dhaka was garrisoned by two companies of the 73rd Native Infantry, numbering approximately 180 men, alongside a detachment of 26 native artillerymen operating two six-pounder field guns. The colonial authorities in Dhaka were already in a state of hyper-vigilance. The 73rd Infantry, with its headquarters in Jalpaiguri, was predominantly recruited from the Arrah and Shahabad regions of Bihar, the precise epicentre of the massive rebellion led by the formidable zamindar Kunwar Singh. British officials harboured profound fears that the sepoys in Dhaka were in active treasonous communication with Kunwar Singh's forces and were merely waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

The news from Chittagong acted as a catalyst for immediate colonial intervention. Fearful that the Chittagong mutineers would march on Dhaka and merge with the 73rd Infantry to form an overwhelming force of more than five hundred heavily armed rebels, the civil and military authorities in Dhaka convened an emergency council. The decision was made to pre-emptively disarm the 73rd Infantry the following morning. To execute this highly volatile operation, the colonial state relied upon a detachment of one hundred European sailors from the Indian Naval Brigade, supported by the European Volunteer Guards in Dhaka. The sepoys of the 73rd Infantry were stationed at Lal Bagh Fort, the sprawling ruins of an incomplete Mughal fortress situated on the banks of the Buriganga River. The site was highly defensible, featuring elevated barracks, thick perimeter walls, and the strategic placement of artillery near the tomb of Bibi Pari.

On the morning of November 22, the disarmament operation commenced. The Treasury Guards were disarmed with relative ease by the European Volunteer Guards, but the primary contingent at Lal Bagh had already been alerted to the colonial administration's intentions. While the Naval Brigade marched towards the fort to demand the surrender of arms, the sepoys initiated a ferocious defensive action. As the sailors attempted to advance through a broken wall near the southern gateway, a volley of musket fire tore through their ranks. One sailor was instantly shot dead by a sentry, and the sepoys quickly positioned their six-pounder guns in front of the Bibi Pari tomb to command the entrance. The engagement at Lal Bagh rapidly escalated into a brutal close-quarters battle. The sepoys utilised the fort's architectural elevation, the hospital buildings, and the cover of the Mughal structures to sustain a heavy barrage against the European forces. However, after a prolonged half-hour firefight, the superior discipline and concentrated firepower of the Naval Brigade overwhelmed the defenders. The sepoys were driven from their barracks, resulting in a devastating loss of life.

Once the sepoys were overpowered, the surviving soldiers broke into small detached parties and fled in various directions, with some attempting to march towards Jalpaiguri and others fleeing through Mymensingh towards the Bhutanese border. The ten sepoys captured in the immediate aftermath were subjected to summary military tribunals and publicly hanged. The Battle of Dhaka eradicated the immediate military danger, but it entrenched a lingering and pervasive paranoia among the European populace, who reportedly slept with loaded revolvers under their pillows for months afterwards. The pre-emptive strike at Lal Bagh, while successful from a colonial military perspective, underscored the sheer desperation and fragility of British authority in Eastern Bengal during the winter of 1857.

CONCLUSION: Reclaiming the 'periphery'

The events of 1857 in Eastern Bengal remind us that this subcontinental seismic uprising was not a monolithic event, but rather a profoundly complex and multi-layered movement. The nature and character of the rebellion varied significantly depending on the specificities of each region. Unlike in Awadh, where soldiers shared deep agrarian and social ties with the local peasantry, the sepoys stationed in Bengal largely operated in a demographic vacuum. This absence of formal attachment to the land and the rural population meant that their mutiny did not easily transcend into a widespread mass civil rebellion within the lower provinces themselves.

However, this regional differentiation does not mean that Eastern Bengal was isolated from the broader conflagration. In fact, the uprisings in places such as Chittagong and Dhaka were deeply interconnected with the events unfolding in the north-central Gangetic heartland. The sepoys in the east followed a strikingly similar pattern of anti-colonial resistance: plundering state treasuries, severing telegraph lines, burning colonial infrastructure, and dismantling the ultimate symbols of British authority—the prisons. Their primary goal after mutinying was almost always to march westwards and reinforce the larger resistance in their homelands.

From the shadows of the Jessore conspiracy, where native militias plotted the overthrow of the local treasury, to the flames of the Chittagong uprising, where sepoys aligned with Manipuri royalty and Kookie tribes to challenge colonial hegemony, the region was actively engaged in resistance against the British state. The fierce Battle of Lal Bagh in Dhaka stands as a testament to the heavy price paid by those who rose against the empire in the east.

Ultimately, while the armed phase of the rebellion in Eastern Bengal was brutally suppressed, the ideological shockwaves of 1857 fundamentally transformed the Bengali intelligentsia. Forced to navigate between their abhorrence of violence and their dawning realisation of colonial economic exploitation, they laid the intellectual groundwork for the modern Indian nationalist movement. The rebellion of 1857 was thus a highly networked crisis in which regional actions in the periphery constantly fed into the core, and vice versa. Eastern Bengal was not merely a quiet bystander; it was a crucial interconnected theatre that distinctly shaped the broader challenge to British imperial rule in the subcontinent.

Niladri Chatterjee is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher in the Department of Cultural Sciences at Linnaeus University. His ORCID is 0000-0002-6808-666X, and he can be reached at niladri.chatterjee@lnu.se.