

India Celebrates 150th Anniversary Of War of Independence Against British

by Ramtanu Maitra

On May 11, 2007, India began a one-year commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the 1857 rebellion by Indian soldiers against the British, at the time India was still ruled by proxy, by the notorious British East India Company. The rebellion, which took the British two years to subdue by violent means, is downplayed by British historians, and their underlings in the Indian subcontinent, as the “Sepoy Mutiny” (an uprising of the lowest-rank soldiers of the Indian garrison). In reality, this was India’s First War of Independence which, though it failed, it put the British colonialists on notice.

On May 10, paying homage to the 1857-58 martyrs, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that events of 1857 stood as a great testimony to the traditions of Hindu-Muslim unity that stood as an example for subsequent generations. “What is significant is that, despite rallying under the flag of ‘deen’ [a concept which is at the core of Islam—ed.] and ‘dharma’ [a concept which is at the heart of both Hinduism and Buddhism—ed.], the rebellion was united. There was no division between Hindus and Muslims in their resistance to alien domination,” Manmohan Singh told a packed Central Hall in Parliament House in New Delhi.

India’s Weak Political Class

However, to the present political leaders who are in power, or vying for power, the 1857 War of Independence remains not only a distant event, but also an event that is understood as it was narrated by British historians. As a result, the commemoration of this nugget in Indian history has remained unenthusiastic and unimaginative. Meerut, where the first bell against the British East India Company was rung, has done little to make the historic sites as monuments which could inspire interest and provide education. As one Meerut resident wrote: “But the search for history has only shown that many sites related to 1857 have been left to rot, the heroes of that struggle mostly forgotten. And at least one spot here has turned into a garbage dump, and a den for drug [addicts].”

The proposed march from Meerut to Delhi faltered and left a bad memory. It was to cover the 40-mile road that mutineers traversed on the night of May 10, to enter Delhi and capture the Red Fort where an octogenarian Moghul emperor,

Bahadur Shah Zafar, resided as a virtual prisoner of the East India Company mercenaries. Some of these inadequacies could be dismissed as poor management and the general lethargy that overwhelms northern India in the May heat. But there were also ideological problems that continue to inhibit the now-old children of India’s 1947 independence, about the importance of the 1857 war. Today’s political leaders of India, with few exceptions, are burdened with the same ideology.

In his book, *The Discovery of India*, that covers India’s vast history in a few hundred pages, Jawaharlal Nehru, one the most important figures in India’s independence in 1947, and first Prime Minister of the Republic of India, summarized what he called “The Great Revolt of 1857”:

“Essentially, it was a feudal outburst, headed by feudal chiefs and other followers and aided by the widespread anti-foreign sentiment. As such, inevitably, it looked up to the relic of Moghul dynasty, still sitting in the Delhi palace, but feeble and old and powerless. Both Hindus and Moslems took full part in the revolt.”

First War of Independence

But, in reality, it was much more than a revolt by the feudal chiefs. In fact, most of the princes and nawabs either did not take sides, or joined the British. Nowhere in northern India was the support for the British more evident than among the Punjabis and Sikhs.

As Prof. Ishtiaq Ahmed wrote in Pakistan’s *The News* on May 5, the Sikh warlords and princes also sided with the British. “Only eight years earlier, in 1849, the English had defeated the successors of Ranjit Singh (1799-1839), and annexed the Sikh Kingdom of Lahore. The East India Company had deployed soldiers from northern India, called Purbi Bhiyas (eastern brothers), against the Sikh armies. Now, the British played upon Sikh anger against the Purbi Bhiyas, and made them crush the Sepoys with a vengeance. Also, Muslim tribal and clan leaders from the Punjab and the NWFP (North-West Frontier Province) helped the British. Afterwards, all of them were rewarded with titles and land grants,” Ishtiaq Ahmed said. At the same time, not all Punjabis sided with the British. In some places there were



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“The Attack of the Mutineers, July 39, 1857,” during the first war for Indian independence against the British. It was an anti-colonial outbreak unique in the 19th Century, and is still being celebrated in India today.

uprisings, and the British were driven out of some of the Punjab towns. (At that time Punjab was an undivided, and very large province.)

Irfan Habib, a Muslim scholar of repute in Delhi, pointed out recently in an article that the rebellion was “an anti-colonial outbreak, unique for its scale in the whole of the nineteenth century. The rebellion pitted against the colonial regime over 120,000 trained professional soldiers from the Bengal Army, the most modern army east of Suez, with tens of thousands of other armed rebels, reinforcing and aiding them.” In terms of the area affected, nearly a fourth of the population of British India (some 50 million people) passed under rebel control, Professor Habib said.

The trigger for the first round of shots was centered on the cartridge of the Enfield rifle used by the British-Indian Army. The cartridge was heavily greased with animal fat. Word went around the Indian soldiers’ barracks that the grease was a mixture of cow (sacred to Hindus) and pig (abhorrent to Muslims) fat.

The first revolt broke out at Barrackpore, about 15 miles northwest of Kolkata (Calcutta) on March 29, 1857. Mangal Pande, a young soldier of the 34th Native Infantry, shot at his sergeant major on the parade ground. When the British adjutant rode over, Pande shot the horse and severely wounded the officer with a sword. He was later arrested and hanged. As collective punishment, the 34th Native Infantry was disbanded. Mangal Pande became an icon to the revolutionaries, heralding the beginning of India’s First War of Independence.

A few weeks later, on April 24, 85 soldiers of the 3rd Light

Cavalry in Meerut refused orders, saying that they could not handle the cartridges that were contaminated with animal fat. These soldiers were court-martialed, and sentenced to ten years of hard labor.

On May 9, the British officers in Meerut outdid themselves. A ceremony took place on the parade ground of Meerut, ostensibly designed to teach the “natives” a lesson. The court-martialed soldiers were publicly humiliated. They were stripped of their uniform, shackled, and sent to the town jail.

The following day was a Sunday. As the British soldiers, officers, and bureaucrats were preparing to go to church services, Meerut exploded.

Enraged soldiers broke open the town jail and released their comrades. A mob from the nearby bazaar and a large group of Indian soldiers poured into the cantonment where the British lived, and the rampaging soldiers killed most of them. Then these soldiers began their 40-mile hike to Delhi to join three regiments of native infantry there. The march was undertaken at night to keep it a secret.

On the morning of May 11, the soldiers from Meerut reached Delhi. Gathering below the walls of the Red Fort, the mutineers called for last Moghul Badshah Bahadur Shah Zafar. A British officer, Captain Douglas, commanded Bahadur Shah Zafar’s personal guard. From the walls high above, Captain Douglas ordered them to disperse. Soldiers accompanied by a mob burst into the palace, killed Douglas and asked Bahadur Shah to reclaim his throne. The 38th, 54th, and 74th regiments of infantry and native artillery under Bakht Khan (1797-1859) joined the rebel army at Delhi during the month of May.

The loss of Delhi was sudden, and dealt a crushing blow to the British authorities. It took the British nearly two months to regroup and then they set out to reclaim Delhi. From Meerut and Shimla (in the hills about 250 miles north of Delhi), two British columns set out for the capital. Hampered by lack of transport, it was weeks before they joined forces based at the Ambala cantonment. Punishing disloyal villages as they advanced, their course could be charted by the scores of corpses they left hanging from trees.

At Badli-ke-Serai, five miles from Delhi, they met the main body of Indian soldiers. The British won there, but most of the Indian soldiers retreated to protect the walls of Delhi. The British established themselves on Delhi ridge, a thin spur of high ground to the north of the city. In September, under the command of Major John Nicholson, and with support of Sikh and Gorkha army, they were able to reclaim Delhi. They breached the walls with heavy guns and were met with a bitter street-to-street fight. In the attack on the Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, Nicholson (considered by some historians as an absolute butcher) was felled by a bullet.

The last tragedy occurred when British officer Hodson arrested old Bahadur Shah Zafar, and killed his three sons in cold blood. The emperor was tried for complicity to murder and other offenses, found guilty, and sent into exile to Rangoon (now, Yangon) in British Burma. His whereabouts were kept secret by the British.

Just before he died in 1862, in a British Army officer's garage in Rangoon, the poet-king Bahadur Shah Zafar wrote: "Who would pray on my behalf? Or bring me a bunch of flowers? Who would light a candle for me? I am nothing but a gloomy tomb." The last two lines of his poetry runs as follows, "*Kitna Hai Bad Naseeb Zafar Dafan ke liya, Do Gaz Zameen bhi na milee Kuye Yar mein*" ("Oh Zafar, how unfortunate are you when you cannot find two yards of land for your burial in your loved one's place," meaning his country).

The arrest of Bahadur Shah Zafar broke the back of the warring Indian soldiers. However, the War of Independence continued. Major battles were fought for another year in and around the cities of Kanpur, Lucknow, Gwalior, and Jhansi.

Simmering Anger

Although the 1857 revolt continues to be depicted in the victor's history books as nothing but an uprising by some low-ranking Indian soldiers because of the mistakes made by the cartridge manufacturers, the seeds of the revolt were sown long before.

According to historians, the arrival of proselytizing missionaries from Britain had caused great unease among the Indians. Evangelical Christians had little understanding of, or respect for, India's ancient faiths. The attitude of scrupulous non-interference in religious affairs that had characterized the British rule in the 18th Century was abandoned.

The native populations noted the British efforts to convert them.

The British passed Act XXI of 1850, which enabled converts to inherit ancestral property. The new law was immediately interpreted as a concession handed to Christian converts. At the same time, the British continued to describe the Indians as "barbarians." The Indians also came to notice that the European judges hardly ever convicted British for their crimes.

Thousands of soldiers and nobles became unemployed when Governor General James Broun-Ramsey (Lord Dalhousie) annexed Avadh in November 1855. He also annexed the Maratha States of Satara, Nagpur, and Jhansi, and several minor principalities. On the death of the ex-Peshwa, Baji Rao II, the pension granted to him was abolished, and the claims of his adopted son, Nana Sahib, were disregarded.

British administrative laws ruined both the peasants and landlords. Indian handicrafts completely collapsed and the craftsmen became impoverished. India became a marketplace for finished goods from England. Poverty increased, and the discontent among the masses motivated the Indians to join the revolt in large numbers.

Professor Habib's point that the Revolt of 1857 had its roots in the pressures exerted on India by the imperialism of free trade can hardly be denied; but the depth and breadth of the upheaval also raise the question of the classes and groups that became involved in it, and of their grievances and aspirations.

The Aftermath

The breakout of India's First War of Independence made the British Crown sit up. The British East India Company handed over India to the Disraeli government, and the British Raj in India began.

More importantly, the War of Independence set the ball rolling in the quarters of powers-that-were in England. The British Crown saw the ability of the Indians—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs—to rally around a decrepit Moghul Badshah in their bloody battle to overthrow the British. Immediately, policies were designed which would keep the Hindu and Muslim interests at odds. The active politics of majority and minorities, the policy of divide and rule began in earnest. Over the next 90 years, the British manipulations succeeded in drawing almost every Indian within the policy structure. Intense hostilities broke out between Hindus and Muslims. They killed each other as if they, and not the British, were the usurpers of India.

This policy of the British Raj bore its poisonous fruits in 1947, when the country was broken up into two countries, and three parts. Thousands lost their lives killing each other, and millions lost everything that they had. The tree is still bearing those poison fruits, and Bahadur Shah Zafar's dafan still remains in Yangon, Myanmar.