

Mutiny or War of Independence? Determining the True Nature of the Uprising of 1857

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Abstract

Many of the landmark events in the history of Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent during the British rule have remained subject to grave disagreements and dissents. The Uprising of 1857 is among the biggest of these landmarks marred by a number of controversies. There have been many differences among historians and analysts regarding its true nature and character. It has been mentioned as the 'War of Independence' by most of the indigenous historians and scholars, while at the same time branded as 'mutiny' by almost all British and European writers with a very few exceptions.

This paper is an attempt to find answers to all these questions and controversies regarding the nature and character of the Uprising of 1857 in the light of information available about its events and the different players and forces who shaped and influenced this epoch making landmark in the history of Indian Subcontinent.

Introduction

The Uprising of 1857 is perhaps the most written about topic in Indian history but most of the writings on it are of descriptive nature, which are of little interest as literature or history. There has always been a need of interpretive writing on this topic to analyze

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the real causes and the true nature of this mega event in the Indian history.

Because of the controversial nature of the British rule in Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, different epics and events that shaped the destiny of Indian Subcontinent during the period are as controversial as the British rule itself. One of these episodes in Indian history was the Uprising of 1857 which has been mentioned as the War of Independence by most of the indigenous historians and scholars and branded as Mutiny by almost all British and European writers with a very few exceptions.

To determine the true nature and character of this event, one has to analyze all the different aspects and controversies regarding this epoch making event. Was it a mutiny or War of Independence? Was it just a sepoy revolt against their higher ranks or a general popular uprising against the foreign rulers of the Subcontinent? Was it pre-planned and an organized movement or just a spontaneous reaction of the sepoys to the ill-advised and unwise policies of the military leadership of the East India Company? Was there a foreign hand involved in the uprising or it was purely indigenous? These are the questions to which the researcher would try to find answers in this paper.

The Uprising and the Controversy

During the 19th century, 1857 was perhaps the most eventful year in the history of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, marked by the controversial beginning of the country's struggle for independence from alien rule. After experiencing a century of enslavement by an alien race, India witnessed an open expression of deep rooted discontent and resentment against its foreign rulers in the shape of a half popular half militant rising. The Uprising of 1857, irrespective of its true nature and character, was so intense that it appeared for a time that the Company's *Raj* would disappear from India.¹

The controversies surrounding the uprising have made it the most misunderstood and debatable chapter of Indian history. The misunderstandings about the nature of this event does not arise so

1 E. D. Thompson, *Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot., n.d.), p.440.

much from the events and the facts of the war themselves as from the fundamental misconception about its causes and genesis.² How and why did it start is a question more important than all other questions regarding its end and results.

It has been regarded generally by the native historians as a 'National Uprising' and even as the 'First War of Independence'. To the British mind, it was mainly a Muslim conspiracy, exploiting Hindu grievances against their masters. Others consider it a premature plot against the British rule hatched by the former ruling elite, the nobility and the aristocracy, sparking out of their grievances and resentment. It has also been asserted as a purely military outbreak produced jointly by ill-advised and faulty policies of the East India Company's military authorities and the grievances and indiscipline of the Indian troops of the Company.³

One can reach the truth by analyzing all the controversies; myths and realities on two extremes put together and then reading between the lines to determine the real causes and the true nature of this milestone in Indian history.

Was it a Mutiny or War of Independence?

The first and foremost controversy about the Uprising of 1857 is about its nature and character; Was it a Mutiny or a War of Independence? As mentioned earlier, to the British mind, it was a mutiny not because it had challenged their rule in India but because they considered it a revolt against a 'lawful and constituted authority'. The event was branded as mutiny for the first time by the then Secretary of State for India Earl Stanley while reporting the situation to the British Parliament and later on, most of the British writers followed the trend.⁴ A patriotic Briton, sincere and loyal to his country and writing from the British perspective could not give it any other name except mutiny, no matter how objective the writer might have been. Even those who

2 Syed Lutfullah, *The Man Behind the War of Independence 1857* (Karachi: Mohammad Ali Educational Society, 1957), p.14.

3 Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.219, and Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, Fourth Ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.263.

4 Tara Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II (Lahore: Book Traders, 1967), p.40.

later condemned the British policy of oppression and injustice in India did not accept it as a national struggle for independence.

One of the earliest analyses of the causes of the war and its real nature was made by Benjamin Disraeli, at that time an opposition leader in the House of Commons. Disraeli stressed the point that unless the real causes of the event were not determined, it would be difficult to restore a lasting peace in India. He outlined all the real and genuine grievances of the Indians against the British rulers and concluded that it was not a military mutiny but the symptoms of deep discontents among the whole population. Therefore, he stressed the point that only military reforms would not meet the dangers threatening British power in India.⁵

The term 'mutiny' is very deceptive and misleading. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the meaning of the word mutiny is "Open Revolt against Constituted Authority".⁶ There is no doubt that the army was abundantly involved in the uprising and that the drive was supplied by the Bengal army, although there were signs of disaffection and rebellion in some regiments of the other Presidencies also, but the outbreak, in its whole length and duration, was neither confined to the army nor was it a mutiny in the ordinary sense of the term, i.e., 'a defiance of the established pattern of deference and of obedience to constituted authority'.⁷ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in *Causes of Indian Revolt* has declared it to be a 'rebellion' as it had challenged the authority of the then government but he had very skillfully avoided the use of the word "constituted" or "lawful" as the attribute of that authority and, similarly, he has also avoided the use of the word 'mutiny'. He calls it a 'revolt' and not a mutiny. In fact, one gets the impression after reading his book that he considered the 'mutiny' a part of a larger 'revolt', hinting to the popular nature of this uprising.

5 A speech delivered by Benjamin Disraeli in the House of Commons on 27 July, 1857, reproduced in Ainslie T. Embree, *Problems in Asian Civilizations: 1857 in India, Mutiny or War of Independence* (Boston: DC Heath and Company, 1963), pp.4-11.

6 *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online), S. V. "Mutiny", by Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/>; Internat accessed 27 August, 2007

7 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.40.

As regards the Rebellion of 1857, the fact is, that for a long period, many grievances had been rankling in the hearts of the people. In course of time, a vast store of explosive material had been collected. It wanted but the application of a match to light it, and that match was applied by the Mutinous Army.⁸

He could not openly declare it a 'War of Independence' due to the sensitivity of the period in which he wrote *Risala Asbab-e-Bagahawat-e-Hind*.

Some British writers who call it a mutiny admit that it was little short of 'real War of Independence'. E. D. Thompson makes the following comment about the controversy and the nature of the uprising:

Two factors differentiated the mutiny from the host of 'little wars' which the English fought in Asia and Africa during the nineteenth century. In most of these (other wars) the final issue was never seriously in doubt, but for four months during the Summer of 1857 it seemed that the mutiny might develop into a real war of independence, which would make reconquest impossible.⁹

Not going into the details of the factors that in Thompson's eyes differentiated the Uprising of 1857 from other minor wars fought by the British in Asia and Africa, one can see the confession in his description of this event that it was near to become a full fledged War of Independence.

Arthur D. Innes, another British author who seems to be less biased and more methodical than others, is also not certain about the true character of the uprising. He is of the view that 'the truth has to be found somewhere between those who say that the revolt was simply a mutiny of sepoys in a panic and those who call the event as an organized revolt'.¹⁰ Though more positive and objective in his views, Innes was still careful enough to avoid the use of the words 'War of Independence'. Instead, he preferred to use the words 'organized revolt'.

Lord Ellenborough, who became the President of the Board of Control of the East India Company in 1858 wrote:

8 Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of Indian Revolt* (Lahore: The Book House, n.d.), p.3.

9 Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, p.438.

10 Arthur D. Innes, *A Short History of the British in India* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1985), p.307.

We must admit that, under the circumstances, the hostilities which have been carried on in Oudh have rather the character of legitimate war than that of rebellion.¹¹

Although he confines his statement only to the events in Oudh but it gives us a hint into the real character of the whole episode if one generalizes his comments in the context of the Uprising of 1857. It was in Oudh that the military revolt had expanded into a popular rebellion involving all sections of the society. It was affected by the Uprising more than any other part of India.¹²

Charles Canning, the Governor-General and the Viceroy of India himself recognized the seriousness of the rising as something more than a mutiny:

The struggle that we have had has been more like a national war than a local insurrection. In its magnitude, duration, scale of expenditure, and in some of its moral features it partakes largely of the former character.¹³

Tara Chand, one of the most authentic and reputed writers on Indian history, declares the Uprising of 1857, after studying all aspects of the uprising, to be 'a war for the liberation of India from the yoke of the foreigners'. The two most important causes that he gives for this event were the 'mortal offense to the dignity and self respect of the ruling class, which had immense social influence over the Indian masses, and the alienation and antagonizing of the masses themselves by the oppressive economic policies, offensive laws, interference in social and religious sensitivities measures and acts of severe discrimination against them.'¹⁴

The fact that the grievances against the rule of East India Company were not limited to the ruling class only but had affected the masses too clearly shows that the uprising was certainly not an aristocratic plot against the Company's rule but a widespread phenomenon that involved the masses also. However, to what extent were the masses involved in the war and how effective was their say in the conduct of the war is certainly debatable. The involvement of the masses in the Uprising will help in determining

11 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.41.

12 S. Gopal, *British Policy in India 1858-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.4.

13 *Ibid.*, p.1.

14 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.42.

its nature and the extent of the mass involvement will help in solving the controversy about its character as a sepoy revolt or popular movement for the liberation of India.

The Uprising, no doubt, started as a military uprising but it appeared to have turned into a popular movement involving the masses. Though popular involvement in the revolt was limited only to a few parts of the Indian Subcontinent and the magnitude of popular involvement was also different at different places, yet the very fact that masses did participate in the uprising makes it qualify to be called 'a general uprising' and not just a military revolt. Tara Chand has recorded the views of two independent French writers in his book who clearly hint to the participation of the common masses into the uprising:

The hour of Indian vespers is soon going to strike. Discontent has invaded all classes of the Indian population; they are going to make common cause with the sepoy.¹⁵

Sir John Lawrence, the man who played an important role in restoring the British authority in India after the uprising, holds that it was merely a sepoy revolt and nothing more than that while Sir James Outram is of the view that it was an organized conspiracy and 'a first step to a popular insurrection.'¹⁶

Irrespective of the extent of their involvement and the number of those involved, there is no denial of the fact that common people from all walks of life; Muslim and Hindu Princes, Landlords, Soldiers, Scholars and Theologians (*Pandits* and *Maulvis*) took part in the war.¹⁷

Major Harriet, the Judge Advocate-General at the trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar concluded his arguments in these words:

The Conspiracy from the very commencement was not confined to the sepoys and did not even originate with them, but had its ramifications throughout the palace and the city.¹⁸

Vincent A. Smith felt constrained to admit that:

15 *Ibid.*, p.41.

16 P. E. Roberts, *History of British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.360.

17 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.43.

18 *Ibid.*, p.42.

Discontent and unrest were widely prevalent among the civil population, and in several places the population rose before the sepoys as those stations mutinied.¹⁹

P. E. Roberts shares the same opinion with Vincent A. Smith as quoted by Tara Chand in his book. E. D. Thompson, however, contends that it was not a general uprising as not even all the sepoys were involved in it and definitely not the general masses.²⁰

N. K. Nigam, an Indian writer, declares it a popular insurrection, of course with a little exaggeration, when he writes:

Every street became a fighting arena and every house a barricade. He (common Indian) had no weapons to fight as they had already been taken away from him by the Indian soldiers. But he still had sword and stone and he made use of both.²¹

This statement should not be misleading as to suggest that this was the situation in all parts of India. The title of his book is *Delhi in 1857* and, therefore, one should not assume that every street had turned into a battleground in all parts of India. This might have been true while writing about Delhi but certainly not fitting to the situation in the Punjab or other parts of northern India and the deep-South. But Nigam seems to be justified in saying that ‘every street became a fighting arena’ which is also evident from the fact that the British, after restoring their authority in Delhi, took a bloody revenge from all people of Delhi — soldiers and civilians including men, women and children.²² Their wrath was directed more against the Muslims and that is why mosques were particularly targeted, demolished, confiscated and auctioned for uses other than prayers. However, it should be noted here that the contemporary Muslim writers and poets who were a part of the nobility in Delhi have mentioned the events of the uprising in the city as ‘rioting’ in a disapproving manner and called those participating in it as ‘mob of *badmashes*’ and miscreants. Zahir Dehlvi, famous poet and courtier of Bahadur Shah Zafar, contemptuously mentions them as ‘the criminals who had been freed from the jail’ by the rebel sepoys and their supporters among

19 *Ibid.*

20 Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, p.436.

21 N.K. Nigam, *Delhi in 1857* (Delhi: S. Chand & Company, 1957), p.146.

22 *Ibid.*, p.150.

the population of Delhi as ‘*chamars* (untouchables, cobblers, and sweepers), *loafers*, *dhobis* (laundrymen), barbers, pickpockets and other vagabonds of the city’. He also informs that ‘No person from a decent family was a part of this crowd of rioters’.²³ The courtiers of Bahadur Shah considered the arrival of the sepoys into the city as ‘an invasion’.²⁴ Zahir’s statement signifies two very important facts; one that not all the people, particularly the Muslims, were a part of the uprising at Delhi and second, that some common Hindus had also joined the rebels in Delhi because people mentioned in his statement by their profession were mostly Hindus in those days.

We cannot find a better conclusion to this part of the paper than what Syed Lutfullah has given in his book. He concludes his arguments about the nature of the Uprising of 1857 in these words:

... It was obviously not a mutiny – the word mutiny was labeled to it by the British to distort and divert the view and blur the judgment. On the other hand, it was not a war in the ordinary sense of the term for war, in its essence, is motivated by the desire to conquer; and, the people of the Subcontinent who fought and fought so heroically in 1857 did not aim at any conquest. If they wanted to conquer any people or any land at all, it was their own land and their own people, something quite different from the conquest aimed at and achieved by Dupleix²⁵ and Clive²⁶, for example. We must, therefore, put emphasis on the word ‘independence’ rather than on the word ‘war’ and dismiss the word ‘mutiny’ as a cruel joke, if nothing else!²⁷

Was it Preplanned and Organized?

Another question of importance that has been raised by several writers is about the planning and organization of the uprising. Was it preplanned and organized? Although the causes of the uprising were deep rooted and can be traced to several decades prior to the uprising, yet there is no evidence available to suggest that the event

23 William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), pp.157-58.

24 *Ibid.*, p.171.

25 Marquis Joseph-Francois Dupleix was the French Colonial Administrator who competed unsuccessfully with the British to extend French control over India.

26 Robert Clive, British soldier and statesman who was instrumental in securing Great Britain’s interests in India.

27 Lutfullah, *The Man Behind the War of Independence 1857*, p.14.

was preplanned and well organized. Even the British writers agree that the 'Sepoys took their leap blindly in the dark – not knowing where they were going',²⁸ and where it would lead to.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was an eye witness to the events during the uprising, has clearly stated that there was no planning or organized conspiracy behind the uprising. He says:

The manner in which the rebellion spread, first here, then there, now breaking out in this place and now in that, is alone good proof that there existed no widespread conspiracy.²⁹

The unbridled and uncontrolled manner in which the rebels operated and took their decisions in Delhi and the way they disobeyed Bahadur Shah Zafar, the unwilling and symbolic head of the uprising, is also a proof of the fact that there was no planning and organization behind the uprising. Bahadur Shah Zafar had no effective control over happenings within his own palace. The orders for the killing of the British women and children in the Red Fort were issued by lesser authorities without the consent of the Emperor. In fact, the King had ordered to take these women and children to the Fort and take care of them.³⁰ But when the troops wanted to execute them, the King witnessed the killing of these innocent women and children as a helpless spectator. Bahadur Shah Zafar had been defied and disobeyed by both his own men and the mutineers from the Company's Army who were in effective control of the situation. The Emperor and his two most trusted and wise personal advisors, Hakim Ahsanullah Khan and Mahboob Ali Khan, were helpless and facing threats to their own lives at the hands of the uncontrollable troops.³¹ The unruly rebels even attacked the *haveli* of Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, the Prime Minister, which was declared by Mirza Ghalib as 'yet another attack on the civilized and highly cultured Delhi'.³² This event and

28 Innes, *A Short History of the British in India*, p.307.

29 Khan, *The Causes of Indian Revolt*, p.4.

30 Mahdi Hussain, *Bahadur Shah II and the War of Independence 1857 in Delhi with its Unforgettable Scenes* (Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1958), p. xvii and Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, pp.169-70.

31 Percival Spear, *Twilight of the Mughals: Studies in Late Mughal Delhi* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.204-05.

32 Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, p.323.

the extortion of money and food items from the traders, merchants, bankers and nobles of Delhi³³ is enough to prove that Bahadur Shah Zafar had no control and authority over the sepoys who had literally forced their entry into Delhi and made Zafar their captive.

Moreover, the cultural and religious diversity and disunity among the Sepoys and the common Indians who had joined hands with the Sepoys prevented their agreement on a centralized plan, a joint national objective and 'national leadership' of the revolt.³⁴ In fact, the lack of planning and disorganized nature of the Uprising was one of the causes of its failure. Still, some of the British writers believe that it was well-organized and preplanned to overthrow the British rule.³⁵

Was it only a Muslim Conspiracy? The Role of Religion in the Uprising

One another very widely believed misconception about the nature of the Uprising of 1857 among the British writers is that it was purely Muslim Intrigue, believing that the Hindus who participated in the fighting were instigated and made to rise by the Muslims. This is mainly because of the assumption, on the part of the British, that as they had snatched political power from the Muslims, therefore, the Muslims wanted to overthrow the British rule to regain their lost position in the Subcontinent.³⁶ But the first spark of disaffection, it is generally agreed upon, were kindled among the Hindu Sepoys who feared an attack upon their caste, honour and self-respect. The civil risings in Oudh, Bihar and Central India were mostly led by the Hindus. The majority of the rebellious *Taluqdars*³⁷ were Hindus. Besides, most of the leaders of the Uprising were also Hindus. But the British believed it was the Muslims who 'fanned the flames of discontent and placed themselves at the head of the movement, for they saw in these

33 For details, see Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, pp.321-25.

34 Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of a British Rule in India*, p.439.

35 Roberts, *History of British India*, p.360.

36 Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, p.442.

37 The head of a *taluqa*, an administrative unit during the Mughal period, later on retained by the British. In unofficial status, it also refers to the owner of a sizable estate or land.

religious grievances of the Hindus the steppingstone to political power. To them, it was the Muslim intrigue and the Muslim leadership that converted a *Sepoy* mutiny into a political conspiracy, aimed at the extinction of British Raj.³⁸ However, some British authorities of the East India Company were in clear picture of the real situation and they knew that it was not just a Muslim conspiracy. Mr. Harvey, the Commissioner of Agra, was of the view that both the Muslims and the Hindus were equally responsible for the events of 1857.³⁹ Sir John Kay, one of the most prolific writers on the history of the British rule in India, was convinced that it was a “Brahmnical Protest”. He points out that the Brahmans, as the traditional guardians of the Hindu culture, felt threatened about the advance of western civilization which was undermining the credibility of their religion and their own privileged position in the Hindu society. In his view, the Brahmans had taken the lead in instigating the soldiers and the general populace to revolt as the last desperate attempt to defend themselves against the forces of modernity.⁴⁰ This clearly negates the wrong notion that it was a Muslim conspiracy, pure and simple.

We will again refer to what Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had to say about the concept of a Muslim conspiracy and *Jehad* against the British. Sir Syed totally dismissed the idea that it was a religious war launched by the Muslims against the British. He says that as the British did not interfere with the Mohammadans in the practice of their religion, therefore the idea of religious crusade against the British could not be entertained. In other words, the Muslims neither had the excuse nor the legitimate reason to declare a holy war against the British. He gives the example of Shah Ismail Shaheed who had preached a religious crusade (*Jehad*) in Hindustan thirty-five years before the Uprising of 1857. On that occasion, he had instructed the *Jehadees* (Holy warriors) not to fight against the British or even create disturbance in the “British Territory.” He had declared and waged the religious war only

38 P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Karachi: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp.62, 66-67.

39 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.42.

40 Embree, *Problems in Asian Civilization*, p.27.

against the tyrannical Sikh rulers of the Punjab who were hindering the practice of Islam in the areas under their control.⁴¹

Sir Syed further argues that the *Fatwa* () on the basis of which it is assumed that the Muslim religious heads had called for *Jihad* against the British was a forgery and that the man who had printed it was a 'turbulent fellow' and a 'noted scoundrel'. He had attached certain names to that *Fatwa* to deceive the public and gain for it a degree of credit. Sir Syed argues that the *Fatwa* had been stamped with the seal of a man who had died before the commencement of the mutinies. The Bareilly mutineers who had arrived into Delhi and their rebel brethren had caused several seals to be forged. He further points out that many of the Delhi *Maulvis* and their followers considered the King (Bahadur Shah Zafar) little better than a heretic and they even did not approve of saying prayers in the mosque to which the King was in the habit of going. 'Can it be thought that men holding such views would give a *Fatwa* in favour of a religious war and of placing the King at the head of it?'⁴²

Though somewhat exaggerated, these facts pointed out by Sir Syed allay the assumption that it was a pure Muslim conspiracy and a religious crusade launched by the Muslims against the professors of Christianity.

Apart from the role of the Muslims in the Uprising, it is also important to determine whether religion had a role in the Uprising or not? Many British historians assert that it was a religious war, fought by the Hindus and the Muslims together against the Christians and Christianity.⁴³ Alexander Duff, the Scottish Missionary and one of the founders of Calcutta University, wrote in a letter that he was convinced that the 'monster rebellion' was of political and religious character.⁴⁴

Russel in his book *My Indian Mutiny Diary* says:

The mutiny was essentially a religious war, with all the flavor of those other religious wars, the Crusades, and its achievement was as

41 Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of Indian Revolt*, p.10.

42 *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

43 Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol.II, p.41.

44 *Ibid.*, p.47.

insubstantial. ... The Sepoy revolted against the sweep of an Evangelical revolution, which, because it was preoccupied with abstract good, was indifferent to the whole fabric of the Indian society and culture.⁴⁵

Actually, the fact that the Muslim religious classes were at the forefront of the Uprising gave it an essentially religious and Muslim colour.⁴⁶ Moreover, in Delhi there were people like Maulvi Mohammad Baqar, the garrulous and outspoken editor of *Dihli Urdu Akhbar* and father of the famous Urdu poet Mohammad Hussain Azad, who called it a *Jehad* and the rebels as *Mujahideen*. His view, however, was contrary to the view of most of the educated Muslim elite of Delhi.⁴⁷

It is also a fact that some Muslim volunteers had joined the rebel sepoys but their number was certainly less than the sepoys. However, towards the end, many sepoys had deserted the ranks of the rebel forces at Delhi due to which the proportion of *Jehadis* had increased dramatically and they numbered just under half of the remaining rebel army; 'of the total estimated insurgent army remaining in Delhi of around 60,000 men as many as 25,000 were *Jehadis*'.⁴⁸ Perhaps it was because of these factors that the Uprising was given a religious connotation and the British believed that it was mainly a Muslim conspiracy. Otherwise, it was as much a Hindu struggle against the foreign rulers of the Subcontinent as it was a Muslim concern. It's interesting to note that there were even some Christian converts to Islam among the ranks of the rebel forces like Sergeant Gordon who 'had laid and fired the guns against the English batteries'.⁴⁹ Another British convert to Islam, a former Company's soldier who had taken the name of Abdullah Beg, remained one of the most active insurgents against the British throughout the Uprising. Participation of people like Gordon and Abdullah Beg can be used as an argument both for and against the idea that religion was one of the motives behind the Uprising. It is also a fact that some British converts to Islam were spared while

45 Michael Edwardes, ed., *My Indian Mutiny Diary* (London: Cassell & Company, 1957), pp.xviii-xix.

46 Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p.65.

47 Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, p.159.

48 *Ibid.*, p.138.

49 *Ibid.*

almost all the Indian converts to Christianity were sought out and hunted down.⁵⁰ Yet, there is no concrete evidence to prove that there were any pre-determined religious or political motives and objectives behind the Uprising, at least at the initial stages.⁵¹

Was there a foreign hand in the Uprising?

Many people also believe that the Persians and Russians were also responsible for fanning the spark of the rebellion into a full-fledged revolt. Particularly the Russian hand was immediately detected in the revolt by some of the British Parliamentarians who were suffering from Russia-phobia at that time. One of them David Urquhart who wrote a pamphlet, criticizing Disraeli's speech in the parliament and arguing that Russia aroused the anti-British feelings among the Indians to cause the uprising, hoping that it will result in the vanishing of the British rule from India and in the rise of independent dominions that could either be brought under the Russian fold of influence through agreements or use of force. He argues that if the objective of the end of British rule in India was not achieved, at least it would shake the British control and weaken Russia's enemy to manageable proportions.⁵² However, none of the Russian agents was ever caught or seen in the courts of the local rulers participating in the revolt or else it would have been pointed out and exaggerated in his pamphlet by Urquhart.

The same was the case with the allegations of the Persians involvement. A poster was posted on the back-wall of Jamia Masjid Delhi purporting to be a proclamation from the Shah of Iran which stated that the Persian forces had crossed the Afghan border and were marching from Herat to India 'to liberate Delhi from Christian rule'. According to the poster, some 500 Persian soldiers were present in Delhi 'disguised in dress and appearance' and 900 more were to reach by the 6th of March along with senior officers. The notice also urged upon the Muslims to refrain from helping and supporting the Christians. The contents of the poster were reprinted in full the next day in the court newspaper *Siraj ul Akhbar* which created a lot of excitement across the city, although

50 *Ibid.*, p.153.

51 Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, p.443.

52 Embree, *Problems in Asian Civilization*, p.22.

the newspaper itself questioned the veracity of the proclamation.⁵³ The poster was most probably the creation of local *jehadis* to enlist the support of the Muslim population of Delhi. Besides the figures quoted in the notice also seem ridiculous in view of the strength of the British forces in India. If at all the Shah of Iran wanted to help his Indian co-religionists, the number of soldiers he commissioned for this purpose should have been in thousands, if not in lacs. Mere 500 or 900 soldiers would not have made any difference at all. It is also a fact that no Persian soldier crossed into British India throughout the Uprising.

Conclusion

After a lengthy discussion and analysis, one can safely conclude that it was certainly not just a military Uprising. While the whole of the Indian population and their hatred for the foreign rulers had become a heap of gun powder, the spark to cause the explosion was certainly provided by the Sepoy revolt. But then it was also not a full-fledged War of Independence; firstly because it was never all India in character, being confined to only Bengal and Central India, and secondly because the fighters in different regions had no single aim or agenda. Nana Dhondupat of Kanpur, Begum Hazrat Mahal of Oudh, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi and many other zonal leaders of the Uprising had their own grievances and wanted to grind their own axe. In case of a victory against the Company's forces, the marriage of convenience between them would have, in all probabilities, fallen apart and their personal interests could have made them fight against each other. So the whole episode at best can be described as an "Uprising", not as a mutiny or a war of independence.

The acts of brutality committed during the Uprising on both the sides cannot be condoned by any standard of morality and humanity. The killing of innocent English women and children was never justifiable. On the other hand, the magnitude of the brutalities committed by the British after they recaptured Delhi was far greater than what had been done by the rebels. The so-called civilized British butchered and humiliated Indians, including princes of the royal Mughal family, in the most undignified and uncivilized manner. Still, it was a proud moment in the history of the Subcontinent and history must not forget the spirited men and women who gave their all in the cause of redeeming their country from the yoke of the alien rulers.

53 Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, pp.124-25.