

Perspectives of the Sepoy Rebellion Perspectives Packet

Document A

The Mutiny and Great Revolt of 1857-59

When soldiers of the Bengal army mutinied in Meerut on May 10, 1857, tension had been growing for some time. The immediate cause of military disaffection was the deployment of the new breech-loading [Enfield rifle](#), the cartridge of which was purportedly greased with pork and beef fat. When Muslim and Hindu troops learned that the tip of the Enfield cartridge had to be bitten off to prepare it for firing, a number of troops refused, for religious reasons, to accept the ammunition. These recalcitrant troops were placed in irons, but their comrades soon came to their rescue. They shot the British officers and made for Delhi, 40 miles (65 km) distant, where there were no British troops. The Indian garrison at Delhi joined them, and by the next nightfall they had secured the city and Mughal fort, proclaiming the aged titular Mughal emperor, [Bahādur Shah II](#), as their leader. There at a stroke was an army, a cause, and a national leader—the only Muslim who appealed to both Hindus and Muslims.

Nature and causes of the rebellion

This movement became much more than a military mutiny. There has been much controversy over its nature and causes. The British military commander [Sir James Outram](#) thought it was a Muslim conspiracy, exploiting Hindu grievances. Or it might have been an aristocratic plot, set off too soon by the Meerut outbreak. But the only evidence for either of these was the circulation from village to village of chapatis, or cakes of unleavened bread, a practice that, though it also occurred on other occasions, was known to have taken place at any time of unrest. The lack of planning after the outbreak rules out these two explanations, while the degree of popular support argues more than a purely military outbreak.

Nationalist historians have seen in it the first Indian war of independence. In fact, it was rather the last effort of traditional India. It began on a point of caste pollution; its leaders were traditionalists who looked to reviving the past, while the small new Westernized class actively supported the British. And the leaders were not united, because they sought to revive former Hindu and Muslim regimes, which in their heyday had bitterly clashed. But something important was required to provoke so many to seize the opportunity of a military uprising to stage a war of independence.

The military cause was both particular and general. The particular reason, the greased cartridges for the [Enfield rifles](#), was a mistake rectified as soon as it was discovered; but the fact that explanations and reissues could not quell the soldiers' suspicions suggests that the troops were already disturbed by other causes. The Bengal army of some 130,000 Indian troops may have contained as many as 40,000 Brahmans as well as many Rajputs. The British had accentuated caste consciousness by careful regulations, had allowed discipline to grow lax, and had failed to maintain understanding between British officers and their men. In addition, the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 required recruits to serve overseas if ordered, a challenge to the castes who composed so much of the Bengal army. To these points may be added the fact that the British garrison in Bengal had been reduced at this time to 23,000 men because of troop withdrawals for the Crimean and Persian wars. (See [Barrackpore Mutiny](#).)

The [general factors](#) that turned a military mutiny into a popular revolt can be comprehensively described under the heading of political, economic, social, and cultural Westernization. Politically, many princes of India had retired into seclusion after their final defeat in 1818. But the wars against

the Afghans and the Sikhs and then the annexations of Dalhousie alarmed and outraged them. The Muslims had lost the large state of Avadh; the Marathas had lost Nagpur, Satara, and Jhansi. Further, the British were becoming increasingly hostile toward traditional survivals and contemptuous of most things Indian. There was therefore both resentment and unease among the old governing class, fanned in Delhi by the British decision to end the Mughal imperial title on Bahādur Shah's death.

Economically and socially, there had been much dislocation in the landholding class all over northern and western India as a result of British land-revenue settlements, setting group against group. There was thus a suppressed tension in the countryside, ready to break out whenever governmental pressure might be reduced.

Then came the Western innovations of the now overconfident British. Their educational policy was a Westernizing one, with English instead of Persian as the official language; the old elites, schooled in the traditional pattern, felt themselves slighted. Western inventions such as the telegraph and railways aroused the prejudice of a conservative society (though Indians crowded the trains when they had them). More disturbing to traditional sensibilities were the interventions, in the name of humanity, in the realm of Hindu custom—e.g., the prohibition of suttee, the campaign against infanticide, the law legalizing remarriage of Hindu widows. Finally, there was the activity of Christian missionaries, by that time widespread. Government was ostentatiously neutral, but Hindu society was inclined to regard the missionaries as eroding Hindu society without openly interfering. In sum, this combination of factors produced, besides the normal tensions endemic in India, an uneasy, fearful, suspicious, and resentful frame of mind and a wind of unrest ready to fan the flame of any actual physical outbreak.

The revolt and its aftermath

The dramatic capture of [Delhi](#) turned mutiny into full-scale revolt. The whole episode falls into three periods: first came the summer of 1857, when the British, without reinforcements from home, fought with their backs to the wall; the second concerned the operations for the relief of Lucknow in the autumn; and the third was the successful campaign of Sir Colin Campbell (later [Baron Clyde](#)) and Sir Hugh Henry Rose (later [Baron Strathnairn of Strathnairn and Jhansi](#)) in the first half of 1858. Mopping-up operations followed, lasting until the British capture of rebel leader [Tantia Topi](#) in April 1859.

From Delhi the revolt spread in June to [Kanpur](#) (Cawnpore) and [Lucknow](#). The surrender of Kanpur, after a relatively brief siege, was followed by a massacre of virtually all British citizens and loyal Indian soldiers at Kanpur. The Lucknow garrison held out in the residency from July 1, in spite of the death of Sir Henry Lawrence on July 4. The campaign then settled down to British attempts to take Delhi and relieve Lucknow. In spite of their apparently desperate situation, the British possessed long-term advantages: they could and did receive reinforcements from Britain; they had, thanks to the resolution of Sir John Lawrence, a firm base in the Punjab, and they had another base in Bengal, where the people were quiet; they had virtually no anxiety in the south and only a little in the west; and they had an immense belief in themselves and their civilization, which gave resolution to their initial desperation. The mutineers, on the other hand, lacked good leadership until nearly the end, and they had no confidence in themselves and suffered the guilt feelings of rebels without a cause, making them frantic and fearful by turns.

In the [Punjab](#) were some 10,000 British troops, which made it possible to disarm the Indian regiments; and the recently defeated Sikhs were so hostile to the Muslims that they supported the British against the Mughal restoration in Delhi. A small British army was improvised, which held the ridge before Delhi against greatly superior forces until Sir John Lawrence was able to send a siege

train under [John Nicholson](#). With this, and the aid of rebel dissensions, Delhi was stormed and captured by the British on September 20, while the emperor [Bahādur Shah](#) surrendered on promise of his life.

Down-country operations centred on the relief of Lucknow. Setting out from Allahabad, [Sir Henry Havelock](#) fought through Kanpur to the Lucknow residency on September 25, where he was besieged in turn. But the back of the rebellion had been broken and time gained for reinforcements to restore British superiority. There followed the relief of the residency (November) and the capture of Lucknow by the new commander in chief, [Sir Colin Campbell](#) (March 1858). By a campaign in Avadh and Rohilkhand, Campbell cleared the countryside.

The next phase was the central Indian campaign of [Sir Hugh Rose](#). He first defeated the [Gwalior](#) contingent and then, when the rebels [Tantia Topi](#) and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi had seized Gwalior, broke up their forces in two more battles. The rani found a soldier's death, and Tantia Topi became a fugitive. With the British recovery of Gwalior (June 20, 1858), the revolt was virtually over.



The restoration of peace was hindered by British cries for vengeance, often leading to indiscriminate reprisals. The treatment of the aged Bahādur Shah, who was sent into exile, was a disgrace to a civilized country; also, the whole population of Delhi was driven out into the open, and thousands were killed after perfunctory trials or no trials at all. Order was restored by the firmness of [Charles John Canning](#) (later Earl Canning), first viceroy of India (governed 1858–62), whose title of “Clemency” was given in derision by angry British merchants in Calcutta, and of Sir John Lawrence in the Punjab. Ferocity led to grave excesses on both sides, distinguishing this war in horror from other wars of the 19th century.

Measures of prevention of future crises naturally began with the army, which was completely reorganized. The ratio of British to Indian troops was fixed at roughly 1:2 instead of 1:5—one British and two Indian battalions were formed into brigades so that no sizable station should be without British troops. The effective Indian artillery, except for a few mountain batteries, was abolished, while the Brahmans and Rajputs of Avadh were reduced in favour of other groups. The officers continued to be British, but they were more closely linked with their men. The army became an efficient professional body, drawn largely from the northwest and aloof from the national life.

[APA Style:](#)

India. (2011). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285248/India>

Document B British Soldiers

Recent scholarship has emphasized atrocities committed during the Sepoy Rebellion on both the sides of the British and the Indians. The primary sources below detail some of these acts.

British General Sir Henry Lawrence stated in August of 1857, “we have killed and drowned 500 out of the 600...men of the regiment.”¹

Another British officer wrote in a letter:

“Every native that appeared in sight was shot down without question, and in the morning Colonel Neill sent out parties of regiment...and burned all the villages near where the ruins of our bungalows stood, and hung every native that they could catch, on the trees that lined the road.”²

Sergeant David McAusland of the 42nd regiment during the Rebellion noted that “three scaffolds and six whipping posts stood outside of the town alongside of the jail and there [took place] executions to the number of six every day.” A judge of the trials whose wife had been killed in the revolt told Sergeant McAusland, “if ever I get the change of [judging] these Black rebels I will hang a man for every hair that was in my wife’s head.”³

¹ Streets, H. (2001). The rebellion of 1857: Origins, consequences, and themes. *Teaching South Asia: An internet journal of pedagogy*, 1, 85-104. Retrieved from <http://QL-VgQtecy4.pdf>. p.97.

² Streets p. 98.

³ Streets p.98

Document C

Modern History Sourcebook:

Elisa Greathed:

An Account of the Opening of the Indian Mutiny at Meerut, 1857

Sunday, the 10th of May, dawned in peace and happiness. The early morning service, at the Cantment Church, saw many assembled together, some never to meet on earth again. The day passed in quiet happiness; no thought of danger disturbed the serenity of that happy home. Alas! how differently closed the Sabbath which dawned so tranquilly. We were on the point of going to the evening service, when the disturbance commenced on the Native Parade ground. Shots and volumes of smoke told of what was going on: our servants begged us not to show ourselves, and urged the necessity of closing our doors, as the mob were approaching. Mr. Greathed [her husband], after loading his arms, took me to the terrace on the top of the house; two of our countrywomen also took refuge with us to escape from the bullets of the rebels. Just at this moment, Mr. Gough, of the 3rd Cavalry, galloped full speed up to the house. He had dashed through the mutinous troops, fired at on all sides, to come and give us notice of the danger. The nephew of the Afghan Chieftain, Jan Fishan, also came for the same purpose, and was, I regret to say, wounded by a Sepoy.

The increasing tumult, thickening smoke, and fires all around, convinced us of the necessity of making our position as safe as we could; our guard were drawn up below. After dark, a party of insurgents rushed into the grounds, drove off the guard, and broke into the house, and set it on fire. On all sides we could hear them smashing and plundering, and calling loudly for us; it seemed once or twice as though footsteps were on the staircase, but no one came up. We owed much to the fidelity of our servants: had but one proved treacherous, our lives must have been sacrificed.

After some time, the flames got the ascendant, and the smoke became intolerable. Just as the fire threatened our destruction, we heard the voice of one of our servants calling to us to come down. At all risks, we descended. Our faithful servant, Golab Khan, seeing our perilous situation amidst the increasing flames, and that every moment was precious, with his characteristic presence of mind and quickness, had suddenly thought of a plan by which to draw away the mob, who, after having satisfied themselves with all the plunder they could get, were every moment becoming more eager in their search for us. He boldly went up to them, won their confidence by declaring himself of their faith, and willing to give us up into their hands. He assured them it was useless to continue their search in the house; but if they would all follow him, he would lead them to a haystack, where we had been concealed.

The plan succeeded; and so convinced were they that what he had told them was the truth, that not a man remained behind. In this interval we got safely down. Not a human being was to be seen near the house; but we had only just time to escape into the garden when the mutinous crowd returned, madder than ever at the deception that had been practised on them. Golab Khan's life was now almost as much at risk as our own; but he happily escaped. In a very few minutes after our descent, the house fell in with a crash, and we thanked God for His merciful preservation of us.

The remaining hours till dawn were not without anxiety. We were sitting quietly in the bright moonlight, on a "charpoy" which one of the servants had brought out, when an

alarm was given that they threatened to search the garden for us. The gardener concealed me under a tree; my husband stood near, with his revolver in his hand. The alarm proved false, and I was glad to be released from my hiding-place.

Never was dawn more welcome to us than on the 11th of May; the daylight showed how complete the work of destruction had been. All was turned into ruin and desolation, and our once bright happy home was now a blackened pile. Sad was the scene; but thankfulness for life left no place for other regrets. With the morning light the mob had all dispersed, and we had no difficulty in making our way to the dragoon lines, where we were most cordially welcomed by our friends, Captain and Mrs. Cookson. They had felt the greatest apprehension as to our fate, knowing that as we were out of cantonments no help could have been given us. We had been utterly cut off from all communication through the night, and sad was the tale of murder and bloodshed we now heard, and terrible the anxiety for those at Delhi, when it was found that the telegraph wires had been destroyed by the Sepoys, before any knowledge of what was occurring had transpired. The mutineers got away during the night, and pursuit was useless. The morrow confirmed our worst fears; but of that hideous massacre all has been made known.

The artillery depot, with its large enclosure, was converted into a fort, and became a home for every one; many families occupied the rooms in the long range of barracks, and the space between was filled with tents. Here we found shelter, and with the aid of "tatties" and thermantidotes, felt little inconvenience from the scorching sun and hot blasts. strength and spirits seemed to rise with the exigencies of our position; no complaints were heard; heat and comparative discomfort were alike disregarded; all were cheerful and ready to help others, and those who had lost all, had their wants generously supplied by those who had been less unfortunate. Our position was perfectly secure and well guarded, and became every day more strongly intrenched. Active preparations at the same time went on in organising a field force. At length all was in readiness, and the order for the march was hailed with delight; sanguine were our hopes that a fortnight, or at the most three weeks, would see our gallant little army on its victorious return. With many and oft-repeated good wishes and prayers, we saw them depart. On the night of the 27th May they marched away.

Source:

Elisa Greathed, "Introduction," in *Letters Written During the Siege of Delhi* by H. H. Greathed, Esq., Late of the Bengal Civil Service, Commissioner and Political Agent of Delhi, edited by his widow. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1858)
Scanned by Jerome S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton

This text is part of the [Internet Modern History Sourcebook](#). The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts for introductory level classes in modern European and World history.

Unless otherwise indicated the specific electronic form of the document is copyright. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. If you do reduplicate the document, indicate the source. No permission is granted for commercial use of the Sourcebook.

(c)Paul Halsall May1998

halsall@murray.fordham.edu

Document D

Bahadur Shah-Azamgarh Proclamation 1857

In 1857-1858, British ruled India erupted in violent rebellion. Some among the rebels imagined the Mughal Empire might be restored to its former power and glory. Such was the hope that animated the Azamgarh Proclamation, issued in the summer of 1857, allegedly by the grandson of the last and largely powerless Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, who controlled little more than the Red Fort in which he lived in Delhi.

It is well known to all that in this age the people of Hindustan [northern India], both Hindus and Muslims, are being ruined under the tyranny and oppression of the infidel and the treacherous English. It is therefore the bounden duty of all the wealthy people of India, especially of those who have any sort of connection with any of the Muslim royal families and are considered the pastors and masters of their people, to stake their lives and property for the well-being of the public...I, who am the grandson of Bahadur Shah, have...come here to extirpate the infidels residing in the eastern part of the country, and to liberate and protect the poor helpless people now groaning under their iron rule...

Several of the Hindu and Muslim chiefs who...have been trying their best to root out the English in India, have presented themselves to me and taken part in the reigning Indian crusade...[B]e it known to all, that the ancient works both of the Hindus and the Muslims, the writings of the miracle-workers, and the calculations of the astrologers, pundits and rammals,⁴ all agree, asserting that the English will no longer have any footing in India or elsewhere. Therefore, it is incumbent on all to give up the hope of the continuation of the British sway, [and to] side with me...

Section I: Regarding Zamindars⁵

It is evident that the British government, in making [land] settlements, have imposed exorbitant jummas,⁶ and have disgraced and ruined several zamindars, by putting up their estates to public auction for arrears of rent, insomuch, that on the institution of a suit by a common ryot⁷ yet, a maidservant, or a slave, the respectable zamindars are summoned into court arrested, put in gaol, and disgraced...Besides this, the coffers of the zamindars are annually taxed with subscriptions for schools, hospitals, roads, etc. Such extortions will have no manner of existence in the Badshahi government;⁸ but, on the contrary, the jummas will be light, the dignity and honour of the zamindars safe, and every zamindar will have absolute rule in his own zamindary. And should any zamindar who have been unjustly deprived of his lands during the English government personally join the war, he will be restored to his [property] and excused paying one-fourth of the revenue.

Section II: Regarding Merchants

It is plain that the infidel and treacherous British government have monopolized the trade of all fine and valuable merchandise such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade of trifles to people, and even in this they are not without their share of the profits, which they secure by means of customs and stamp fees, etc, in money suits, so that the people have merely a trade in name. Besides this, the profits of the traders are taxed with postages, tolls, and subscriptions for schools. Notwithstanding all these concessions,

⁴ Fortune tellers

⁵ Large landowners

⁶ taxes

⁷ Peasant farmer

⁸ Restored imperial government

the merchants are liable to imprisonment and disgrace at the instance or complaint of a worthless man. When the Badshahi government is established, all these aforesaid fraudulent practices shall be dispense with, and the trade of ever article, without exception both by land and water, shall be open to the native merchants of India, who will have the benefit of the government steam-vessels and steam carriages for the conveyance of their merchandise gratis...It is therefore, the duty of every merchant to take part in the war, and aid the Badshahi government with his men and money....

Section III: Regarding Public Servants

It is not a secret thing, that under the British government, natives employed in the civil and military services have little respect, low pay, and no manner of influence; and all the posts of dignity and emolument in both the departments are exclusively bestowed upon Englishmen....but under the Badshahi government, [these] postswill be given to the government, [these] posts...will be given to the natives....Natives, whether Hindus or Muslims, who fall fighting against the English, are sure to go to heaven; and those killed fighting for the English, will, doubtless, go to hell; therefore, all the natives in the British service ought to be alive to their religion and interest, and, abjuring their loyalty to the English, side with the Badshahi government and obtain salaries of 200 to 300 rupees per month for the present, and be entitled to high posts in future.

Section V: Regarding Pundits,⁹ Fakirs,¹⁰ and Other Learned Persons

The pundits and fakirs being the guardians of the Hindu and Muslim religions, respectively, and the European being the enemies of both the religions, and as at present a war is raging against the English on account of religion, the pundits and fakirs are bound to present themselves to me and take their share in the holy war, otherwise they will stand condemned...but if they come, they will, when the Badshahi government is well established, receive rent-free lands.

Lastly, be it know to all, the whoever out of the above-named classes, shall...still cling to the British government, all his estates shall be confiscated, and his property plundered, and he himself, with his whole family, shall be imprisoned, and ultimately be put to death.

Strayer, R.W. (2011). *Ways of the world: A global history with sources*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

⁹ scholars

¹⁰ Religious mystics

Document E
Proclamations of Nana Sahib

Must be printed from <http://www.csas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny/Texts-Part2.html#Azamgarh>
(Scroll down to 4. Proclamations of Nana Sahib)

Document F

Indian Peasants

Some historians have debated the role of peasants in the Rebellion of 1857. The peasants generally turned against their natural enemies, especially enemies that had profited from the British land administration. Many peasants were distressed by the revenue payments demanded by the British. Groups that had once been pastoral moved to plunder neighboring towns. Some individuals capitalized on the disorder and plundered the cities.

“The Hindu inhabitants of the town of Sirsa fled in dismay chiefly to Bikaner territory, and the Muhammedan (Muslim) population of the surrounding villages rose *en masse* and began to plunder the town and the neighboring Hindu villages. The Tahsildar of Sirsa, the Revenue Sarishtadar and the Kotwali Muharrir were murdered and the records of the District Office were torn and scattered about...The destruction of property was most wanton. Whatever the insurgents were unable to carry away they burned or broke to pieces and for a time the most violent portion of the population had it all its own way. The Ranghars and Pachadas of Hissar and the Bhattis of Sirsa at once took advantage of the subversion of British rule to revert to their old predatory habits and the district was at once plunged into utter anarchy and confusion.”¹¹

There were similar problems in Meerut. British General Hewitt acknowledged in a letter:

“...In consequence of the district being at present left totally unprotected, it has become almost entirely disorganized, wholesale butcheries and plunderings are prevalent throughout it, and unless some vigorous measures are taken to assist our friends and punish our foes, we shall be totally deserted by the mass of the people; those still faithful to us are becoming disgusted at our apparent apathy, and mutiny and rebellion of today may become a revolution.”¹²

At Ganga Parshad, a 3rd Cavalry sowar with a sword galloped through the town shouting, “Brothers, Hindoos, and Mussulmans (Muslims), haste and join us, we are going to a religious war. Be assured we will not harm those who join us, but fight only against the Government.”¹³

¹¹ Stokes, E. (1986). *The peasant armed: The Indian revolt of 1857*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Ed. C.A. Bayly. p. 121

¹² Stokes p. 156

¹³ Stokes p. 145

Document G Indian Muslims

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

In *Causes of the Indian Rebellion of 1857*, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan outlines his view on the roots of the rebellion of 1857. He was the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College.

He thought the revolt depended on five principles:

1. “Misunderstanding among subjects
2. Promulgation of laws, regulations against the norms of Indian governance
3. Ignorance of the government about the real conditions, habits and manners of the people
4. Discontinuation of acts that should have been a must
5. Mismanagement and unpreparedness of the army”¹⁴

The most important cause in Khan’s view was state act’s that interfered with the religion of India.

“There is no doubt that all, be they illiterate or intelligent, high or low in society, they all thought that the heartfelt desire of our government was to intervene in religious and social customs and turn all, be they Hindus or Muslims, to Christianity and followers of the customs or norms of their own country. This was the main reason for the rebellion.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Khan, S.A. (2007). *Causes of Indian rebellion 1857*. (J. Ashraf, Trans.) Delhi: Asha Jyoti BookSellers & Publishers. (Original work published in 1859). p.119-120.

¹⁵Khan p.121-122.

Document H British News Sources

During the Rebellion the 900 British soldiers and families were besieged at Kanpur by rebelling forces under the direction of Nana Sahib. After being promised safe passage to Allahabad, the rebel forces killed all the soldiers and their families, including British women and children. This led to a shift of the portrayal of the Sepoy Rebellion in the British media. The *London Times* reported on the rebellion 108 times between August 15, 1857-February 3, 1860. The *Illustrated London News* published that “every British heart, from the highest to the humblest of the land, glows with honest wrath, and demands justice, prompt, and unsparing, on the bloody minded instruments of the rebellion.” In India, the *Delhi Gazette* published that the “paramount duty of the British government is now retribution—a duty to the dead and living.”¹⁶



17

¹⁶Streets, H. (2001). The rebellion of 1857: Origins, consequences, and themes. *Teaching South Asia: An internet journal of pedagogy*, 1, 85-104. Retrieved from <http://QL-VgQtecy4.pdf>. p. 95

¹⁷<http://urts55.uni-trier.de:9090/EGO/en/mediainfo/english-cartoon-on-the-indian-rebellion-of-1857>