

The Mutiny of Eighteen Fifty Seven

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The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857 by R C Majumdar. Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta April 1957, Pp 278, index. Price Rs 15,

• **Eighteen Fifty Seven** by Surendra Nath Sen, The Publications Division, Government of India. May 1957. Pp 420, bibliography and index. Price Rs 5.50 Popular Edition, 7.00 Library Edition.

All historians have to start from the same sources while working on the subject, viz, contemporary documents and records. The volume of such materials is stupendous. But coming as it does mostly from the sary parters, of British officials and agents, it can throw only partial light on the happenings of 1857 and for this any reason, it has to be very carefully handled. Both Drs. Sen and Majumdar have admirably exploited this material for establishing their respective cases.

According to Prof Majumdar though there was no love lost between the British and the various local chiefs, the native rulers were almost invariably passive onlookers and in many cases openly against the movement.

Dr Sen, on the other hand, accepts that the rising assumed a national character, at least at certain places, though diverse factors operated in the growth of this feeling of national unity.

None of them, however, tries to answer the question: Why such a large number of sepoys drawn from classes of peasants and artisans revolted arid fought desperately against the British, why in sonic places the mutiny received such a mass support, why in Bengal there was a peasant rising within a couple of years from 1857 and whether or not the revolt exposed, for the first time, chinks in the British armour, thereby presaging the national struggle which reached its culmination exactly 90 years later.

FOR some time past, historians have been busy uncovering further details about the first Indian rising against British rule. The revolt of 1857 has always been a source and inspiration for intensive research and hot controversy among people of varying affiliations, representing different and often opposing points of view, and emotions.

Recently, people all over India celebrated in a grand manner the first centenary of the great revolt of 1857, the one that is often taken to be the first stage of the national struggle for independence. Their celebrations were shared by their democratic and anti-Imperialist friends all over the world. In fact, some of the latter like the Soviet Union, are bringing out their official histories, in collaboration with Indian historians, of the great revolt of 1857.

Naturally enough, the Government of India too, had engaged a very competent staff to bring out an official history of the rising of 1857, on behalf of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The book, written by Dr Surendra Nath Sen, would very justifiably attract the attention and interest of all those Indians and foreigners who are avowedly eager to know the actual nature of the movement. More sensational has been the publication of the other book, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857* by Dr R C Majumdar and its reception among the general reading public. Dr

Majumdar, as we know, was entrusted to supervise the researches conducted by the Government of India. Subsequently, however, the findings he made in the course of his researches led him to work on his own from a totally new angle.

Historians could never have agreed on the fundamental character of the Sepoy Mutiny. That is to say, there has always been scope for difference of opinion regarding its causes, its nature, its extent and basis, and finally the elements from which its participants came. Official British opinion was that the outbreak of 1857 had merely been a revolt of the Sepoys, infuriated because of the outrage their religious beliefs (grease cartridge), joined in by the discontented feudal elements and the 'goondah sections' of the civil population. Later on, some nationalists like Vir Savarkar saw in this rising the first attempt on the part of the Indian people to throw off the foreign yoke. Now, after the achievement of Independence, and on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Revolt it is desirable, in fact quite necessary, that we should ascertain if it was a real struggle for national independence or just a racial-religious-feudal rebellion. It is reasonable to expect that we should be enlightened by the findings of such eminent historians as Dr S N Sen and Dr R C Majumdar, explaining the true meaning of the events of 1857.

All historians have to start from the same premises while working on the subject namely contemporary documents and records. The volume of such contemporary evidence is simply stupendous. Coming as these do, mostly from the quarters of British officials and agents, these papers have brought to light only a partial picture of the happenings of 1857. And for this very reason, they have to be very carefully studied and used. Both Drs Sen and Majumdar have admirably succeeded in exploiting this material for establishing their cases. Dr Majumdar has begun with a brief but comprehensive review of the gradual expansion and consolidation of British power in India throughout the course of a century (1757-1857) and the effects it produced on the sepoy mutiny of 1857. Up to this point, he and Dr Sen are in agreement. Where they differ is on the interpretation of the actions of the discontented chiefs and of the sepoys who revolted in town after town, district after district. While Dr Majumdar presents a most illuminating study of the so called leaders of the sepoy mutiny, their characters, their relations with the British and their ultimately joining the ranks of the mutineers, Dr Sen deals very adequately and scientifically, with the risings in various parts of India, and the different forms they assumed.

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According to Dr Majumdar, though there was no love lost between the British Government in India and the various local chiefs, the native numbers were almost invariably passive onlookers and in many cases, openly against the movement. Those natives who ultimately joined the revolt were forced by the actions of private Englishmen of the Government, and often by the threats of mutineering sepoys. He shows how even then, jealousy and mutual suspicion among rival chiefs, feudal interests and communal feelings hampered a union of the 'rebel' forces. He examines the character of the sepoy risings and the disturbance among the civil population and finds that these were largely excited by religious sentiments, fanned by miscreants and goondas. In short, he reaches almost the identical conclusion, though from different premises, already advanced by official British historians.

Not Pre-planned

Dr Sen, on the other hand, accepts that the rising of 1857 assumed a national character at least at certain places. He rightly points out that diverse factors operated in the growth of this feeling of national unity, such as feudal loyalty, religious feeling etc. Hut in many cases, this national movement assumed a very low character, disfigured by communal riots, unnecessary cruelties and excesses. The native chiefs were led by motives of personal gain not by the nationalistic and democratic ideals of 19th century Liberal Europe and the sepoys and their peasant associates often betrayed a medieval spirit in their demands on the British Government. Both historians are thus far agreed that the revolt was not pre-planned or concerted.

It is really unfortunate that such eminent historians as Or Sen or Dr Majumdar would totally ignore the lot of the common man, the peasant, under the first hundred years of British rule. They could have profitably discussed whether or not British imperialism in India meant real economic servitude for the masses; why such a large number of sepoys of peasant and artisan extraction revolted and fought, so desperately against British forces; why in Oudh and its surroundings, the mutiny received such a mass support: why in Bengal there was a sympathetic peasant rising within a couple of years from 1857; whether or not the common people and the

feudal chiefs had initially combined with the sub-conscious aim of throwing off the yoke of foreign rule; whether or not the revolt of 1857 exposed some vulnerable points in the British armour for the first

time, thereby initiating a phased struggle for national independence that reached its culmination exactly ninety years later. These questions remain unanswered in either book.



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