

Mutiny Or National War? A Critical Analysis on the Nationalist Views Around the Revolt of 1857

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Abstract:

The history of Colonial India and anti-British uprisings had been shaped by various incitements preselling throughout the colonial rule, The revolt of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny had a notable stand among all of these events. After the consolidation of British rule in India following the battles of Plassey and battle of Buxar, growing discontent against colonial discriminations and exploitative policies with intervention into the socio-cultural sphere of India promoted rebellious behaviors. From such a context with the immediate reason of Enfield riffle, uprising among the native sepoys submersed the emotions of common Indians and a massive protest had broken out. Incorporations of ruling elites and aristocratic families amalgamated the scale of the revolution. In terms of history, the incident poses a potential for popular debated around the scholarly communities. Same incidents have been dissected through different approaches. This paper is a generous attempt to tap on the nationalist portion alongside the on-going debates around the revolt of 1857.

Keywords: Revolt, Debate, Nationalist View

1. INTRODUCTION:

The era of 1857 and its consecutive events were treated as one of the trends setting milestone in the history of colonial India. After the colonial took over in the administrative sectors of most of the parts of Indian Sub-continent anti-British movements broke out. Amides those the Revolt of 1857 got special connotation in the history of India as one of the major waves of large-scale participation against the common enemy. The course of 1857 witnessed various historical developments against the foreign dominance. The very nature of the revolt was also full of complicated power struggles and combined efforts. As part of the popular interpretations around the Revolt of 1857, the Nationalist historians highlighted the notion of freedom from foreigners. The Revolt was cited in multiple terms likewise – “India’s War of Independence”, “National movement”, “Sepoy Mutiny”, “Popular Revolution”, “Civil Uprising”, “Muslim conspiracy”, “Brahmanical Protest”, “Dalhousie Aftermath” etc. throughout the debates. In this paper particularly the aspects in relation with the nationalist views are being considered with further options for comprehensive analysis.

2. THE NATIONALIST VIEW ON 1857:

The idea of nationalism seeks for glorification of the past. The Nationalist approach towards the understanding of the revolt of 1857 was more of reactionary to the colonial view. Still among the Nationalist historians there’re contradictions. Among the Nationalist views the writings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan were the earliest. He had prepared his own assessments on 1857. During the digestors days, he was

in Bijapur, a rebel center of the revolt. He produced the famous book entitled as – “Asbab-i-Bhagawat-i-Hind”, later translated into English by Sir Auckland Colvin and G. F. I. Graham under the title of “The causes of the Indian revolt”. In his understanding the revolt of 1857 was kind of a result of “a vast store of explosive materials” to which “a match was applied by the mutinous army”. Khan was clear to the fact that the events of 1857 were not result of planned conspiracy. The manner in which the rebellion spread, first here, than there, now braking out in one place, now in other was showed as good proof that there existed no widespread conspiracy. He also emphasised that the uprising was not caused by “national hatred”, because in such case rebellion must broke out when the colonial power was in a weak stage. He even didn’t treat the rebels as equal to the British east India Company. But strongly criticized the British Government as “in error of judgement, in greed and out of their ancestral pride”. In the latter half of his life, when the mutiny became a milestone Ahmad Khan changed his expressions towards the ‘military mutiny’ and supported the view that it had conveyed an idea of ‘something more than that real fact’. To defend Muslim community from false allegations, he put all Indians in same basket. In this way he had challenged the colonial concept that “Muslims were the chief architect of the rebellion”.

The Bengali Bhadrakalok, too had little sympathy for the rebellion of 1857. Sambhu Chandra Mookarjee published a pamphlet in 1859 entitled as – “The Mutinies and the People” or “Statements of Native Fidelity During the Outbreak of 1857-58”. Several meetings were organized on regular basis in Calcutta to condemn the revolt. Kishori Chandra Mitra, a contemporary Bengali journalist looked at the matter as – “The insurrection is essentially a military insurrection. It is the revolt of a Lack of sepoys. It has nothing of popular element in it. The proportion of those who had joined the rebels sinks into nothingness when compared whose sympathies are enlisted with the government. While the former may be counted by thousands, the latter may be counted by millions.”

Among the actual academic Nationalist historians there is the core belief that the events of 1857 might represent something larger than mutiny of sepoys. The Hindu Patriot (Newspaper) broke the stereotypical denomination of 1857 as a mutiny. Instead on 21st May 1857, it had commented – “It is no larger than a mutiny, but a rebellion. Perhaps it will be said that all mutinies, when they attain a certain measure of success rose to the dignity of a rebellion. But the present mutinies of Bengal army have one particular feature – they have from the beginning drawn the sympathy of the country”. Most of the later Nationalist historians primarily concerned to add the narrative of Indian Nationalism with 1857. Actually, it was a strategically empowered move considering the rise of nationalist movements in post-mutiny era.

The chain of Nationalist thinking was triggered with the writings of V. D. Savarkar. Savarkar had published the book “The [Indian War of Independence” in 1909, from London. It was the first full-length book on 1857, originally published in Marathi in 1908 as “Attharahasau Sattavanche Swatantrya Samar”. The English version was published with anonymous authorship as ‘An Indian Nationalist’. As published in the mid of “Swadeshi Movement” the whole purpose of this book was to inspire Indian freedom fighters through our old glory. Savarkar’s book was regarded as a veritable ‘Bible’ by Indian revolutionaries. Personally, Savarkar himself was in favor of violence to eradicate colonial rule. Thus, the idea of 1857 as “First War of Independence” had worked as a trend setter. V. D. Savarkar strongly argued for “Hindu Rastra” and “Akhand Bharat” by publishing an essay as – “Hindu Sangathankarta Swarashtra Ka Itihas Kis Tarah Likhein Aur Pahain” (How does the working of Hindu consolidation Ought to Write and Read the History of their own Nation). He eventually glorified the historical characters of the revolt. In his opinion – ‘Fifty years have passed and those who died for the honour of their soil and race are looked upon as madman and villain by the worlds abroad, while their own kith and kin for whom they shed their blood

are ashamed to them.” Inspired by him, Subhas Chandra Bose formed a ‘Jhansi Rani Regiment’ within INC. G. M. Jhoshi, in his introduction of the 1947 edition of Savarkar’s book cited the fact that – “His (Savarkar’s) object in the writing this history was subject to historical accuracy, to inspire the people with burning desire to rise again wage a second and a successful war to liberate their motherland”. Although the views of Savarkar were challenged and criticised by some professional historians, but the proven point is that the history of 1857 was never written in this scientific spirit by any other Indian or foreigner. According to Savarkar War of 1857 was not caused by a ‘flimsy and momentary grivance’ but rather a ‘planned uprising with an identifiable cast of heroes.’

Regarding the ‘Cartridge factor’ Savarkar renounced the real cause as love to one’s religion (Swadharma) and love to one’s country (Swaraj). Simultaneously, he propagated the very idea of “Hinduvta” referring the equal participation of Hindus and Muslims. He proposed to the revolutionaries to “die for the sake of Dharma, and while dying kill all; in killing is your victory, your own rule.” G. B. Malleson, one of the early historians of 1857 also admitted the impact of principal figures from both Hindus and Muslims in this context. Nana Sahib, Azimullah Khan, Tantia Tope, Rani Laxmibai, Knower Singh, Begam Hazrat Mahal, Bahadur Shah Zafar were such front runners of 1857. From here, Savarkar extracted the concept of “united nation in the adherents of Islam as well as Hinduism.” He also talks about the ‘Secret Societies’ and ‘art of communication through Chapattis’. British parliament itself spoke about the circulation of ‘Mysterious Cakes’ and ‘Lotus flower’ several months before the outbreak as ‘an outward and visible sign of conspiracy’. Proving the fact that the rebellion had reached the minds of people throughout the whole country. In terms of religion, Savarkar compared the bloodbath of ‘white flash’ with sacrifice (Boli) for independence (Swatantrata).

After 1947, the Nationalistic view gained considerable popularity and academic support. Another eminent Nationalist historian R. C. Mazumdar had published another work on 1857 entitled as – “The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857”, published in 1957. Mazumdar’s views in many ways are direct rebuttal to Savarkar. Contemporary Congress leaders wanted to propose an “organized attempt of national heroes of India in 1857”. But Mazumdar had other plans. He had inspected some of the primary sources of that period like a diary of Azimullah, letters of Laxmibai etc. and generated his own interpretations. He clearly mentioned that – “nothing in the conduct and behaviour of the sepoys which would justify us in the brief, or even assumption that they were inspired by love of their country and fought against the British with the definite idea of freeing their motherland”. Thus he regarded that 1857 was “neither national in character, nor a war of independence” Although he admitted the bravery of Indian heroes in 1857, as Savarkar did but negate the element of patriotism. In the depiction of the key figures R. C. Mazumdar again contrasted to Savarkar. On one hand Savarkar showed proper relations between Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope from childhood and Msazumdar argued that Nana Sahib had nothing to do with the mutiny instead. In case of Laxmibai, Mazumdar cited – “nothing can be more erroneous than to associate her name with a struggle of independence, either of Jhansi or of India.” From the perspective of Savarkar Bahadur Shah Zafar was a key conspirator of 1857. In the age of 82, the last Mughal emperor showed enough courage to join the rebellion, later on faced the reoperations too. Savarkar cordially writes – “it was in the ‘Diwan-e-Khas’ of Delhi, more than in any other Durbar, that the seed of revolution began to root.” Inspired by the ideas of Savarkar eventually Abul kalam Azad once commented – “India faced the trial of 1857 as a united community”. But Mazumdar again debunks the theory of “Hindu-Muslim Unity”. Regarding the failure of the revolt, he criticised the lack of organizational skill among the leadership. The “Divide and Rule” strategy of colonial rulers was considered as the major cause behind it. His concluding words on 1857 are

– “The miseries and bloodshed of 1857-58 were not the birth pang of a freedom movement in India, but the dying groans of an obsolete aristocracy and centrifugal feudalism of the medieval age”.

There are other historians who have offered their ideas on 1857 in the centenary year. In the year of 1957 there was a flood of books on 1857 along with nationalist ideology. S. N. Sen published a government sponsored book named as – “Eighteen Fifty-seven”. He looked at the liberal approach to recognize and re-examine the history of 1857. He mostly focused on study of 1857 ‘dispassionately and objectively’. Abul Kalam Azad, an ally of sen’s work didn’t admit the view that the uprising was a conspiracy. He criticised the Savarkar’s propagation of the rebellion. According to him the ‘modern type’ thinking and narrative was missing in Savarkar’s theory. In simple terms, R. C. Mazumdar, S. B. Chaudhury, S. N. Sen, K. K. Datta – no one of them are uniformly comfortable with the idea of 1857 as “First war of Independence”. Sen and Azad questioned the concept of unity in regards with partition. If there was a sentiment of religious unity, partition had not be reinforced by religious passion. Notably that, Sen didn’t show any doubt on the fact that rebels wanted to get rid of the foreign government. He felt that the uprising was “inevitable” since no dependent nation can reconcile itself for foreign domination.

S. B. Chaudhury, another prominent Nationalist historian represented 1857 as “a national resistance movement against an alien imperial rule”. Primarily, he had shown the equal involvement of civilians along with military. By proposing the debacles and plunders in multiple places along with villages of rebel authority Chaudhury the revolt as a “rebellion of united people against the state”. According to him – “the movement expressed a profound desire of freedom on the part of the people of India and that it was not merely a feudal movement that had within in the germs of progress”. The contemporary President of India lauded Chaudhury’s view on 1857.

R. C. Joshi, a Marxist influenced Nationalist historian in his essay, “1857 in our history” said that the central aim of 1857-58 insurrection was to destroy the British state in India. Haraprashad Chattopadhyay, inspired by R. C. Mazumdar’s view wrote – “Neither the revolted sepoys nor the rebels from the civil society had the common and positive ideal of realizing the political self-determination. The motives with which they were actuated to rise in revolt during the mutiny were selfish in nature”. Even moving further Mazumdar in his proposal called the revolt of 1857 an “attempt of disposed Muslim class to restore the Mughal empire”. Rudrangshu Mukherjee did an extensive study on 1857 with prime focus on Awadh. Loss of King, loss of land, loss of religion all these factors combined in Awadh to influence people against colonial rule. Thus, Mukherjee prefers to characterised the revolt in Awadh as a “popular rejection of an alien order”, where both Hindus and Muslims had equal to lose or gain.

S. B. Chaudhury in his writings probably meant that if the revolt of 1857 not a war of independence, at the least it had provided a base for national movements later on. For the Rebellion of 1857 he writes – “the first combined attempt of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power. This is a real, if remote, approach to the freedom movement of India of a later age”. This view was much closer to that of Savarkar’s interpretation. Such views ultimately mobilized the anti-British sentiments in a pan-India level. M. N. Roy and Rajani Palme Dutt, two of the Nationalist historians with economy as their core attention also shared their views on the Revolt. According to this duo 1857 was “a struggle between the worn out feudal system and newly introduced commercial capitalism, that sought to achieve political supremacy over the former. A major peasant revolt among the decaying feudal forces”. With special mention the ‘Drain of Wealth’ theory of Dada Bhai Naurauji was considered as one of the important steps for economic awareness and growing discontentment among natives. Later on, broke out through various rebellious activities. Jawahar Lal Nehru, although not being a prominent historian wrote about the Revolt in his book – “The Discovery

of India”. His views on 1857 are – “It was much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian independence.” On the same time, due to the role of feudal chiefs, he also defined it as ‘a feudal outburst’.

A more recent analysis of 1857 by Rajat Kanta Ray in “The felt community: Commonality and Mentality before the emergence of Indian Nationalism”, focuses on the role of religion. In Ray’s interpretation, 1857 was a ‘War of religion’ more than a sense of individual both of the communities (Hindus and Muslims) profoundly moved with the sense of religious emotions against common enemy. Throughout the course of 1857, apples were made to slaughter British to prove faith on Gangas, Tulsi and Saligram (for Hindus) and Allah and Quran (for Muslims). Risala Fateh-i-Islam, a pamphlet appeared in 1857 asking Hindus and Muslims to “prepare themselves for the slaughter of English in order to protect their din and dharma”. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, right after the rebellion to enhance the position of Muslims denounced the factor of plea of religion or ‘Jihad’ in revolt of 1857. He proposed the involvement of Muslims as rebels not as religious leaders.

As a whole the Nationalistic view for the Revolt of 1857 has inner contradictions. Historians from different background and different periods of time expressed their ideologies in amalgamation with the core idea of nationalism. All of them have anonymous consent towards the fact that the uprising was a effort against the foreign enemies, i. e. – the British East India Company. Rest of the issues like War of independence, Hindu-Muslim unity, national movement etc. had contradictions. Still amidst different schools of thoughts the nationalist ideology has strengthen its position as the voice of the Indians regardless its dissimilarities.

3. COUNTERS AND CRITICISM:

Colonial or Imperialist historian totally opposed the Nationalist historians and their views on the revolt of 1857. Colonial historian has moved a side for a more neutral view, which have in turn been challenge by nationalist writers and their agendas. Most of the Colonial historians had agreed to the fact that the Revolt of 1857 cannot be described as a true “National Movement for Independence”. For that they showed a very promising reason that there was not any concept of single Indian Nation at that time. Notably that, different Colonial historians had dissimilarities among themselves, still all of their arguments has equal Importance. Edward Henry Stanley (1827 – 1893), who was the Secretary of the State for British India, addressed the British Assembly regarding the Revolt of 1857 as a “Sepoy Mutiny” or Military centric movement. Some of the other British Historians, like – Sir John Lowerenc, Malleson reacted to the Revolt of 1857 as a “Sepoy Mutiny” and joined his views. John Seeley (1834 – 1895) was one of the Liberal British historian and Political analyst. He was well known as a prominent advocate for the British Empire. In his opinion that Revolt of 1857 was not a National Movement, it was a just a Sepoy Mutiny Movement. As per reasons he questioned about lack of “Native leadership and popular support”. Thus, according to him, it was just a selfish Sepoy Mutiny Movement, which lacked in popular supported from grand audience. Moreover, Colonial historians like L. E. R. Rees, T. R. Holmes passed their arguments on the Revolt of 1857 which have great importance. L. E. R. Rees observed that the Revolt was a “War against Christianity”. On the other hand, T. R. Holmes popularized the view that the Revolt of 1857 was a “Conflict between civilizations and barbarism” or a “Struggle between oriental and occidental civilization and culture”.

Marxist historians offer a distinctive lens through which to examine this rebellion, emphasizing the concept of economic dimensions of colonial exploitation, class struggles, and the role of imperialism. While traditional narratives often focus on the role of sepoys (Indian soldiers serving in the British army)

in instigating the revolt, Marxist historians emphasize the participation of diverse social groups, including peasants, artisans, and tribal communities. Marxist historians argue that the revolt of 1857 was a response to the ruthless economic exploitation perpetrated by British colonialism in India. The policies of the British East India Company, including land revenue extraction, heavy taxation, and the promotion of cash crops, wrought havoc on the Indian economy, impoverishing the peasantry and artisans while enriching British capitalists and landlords. Ranajit Guha and Eric Stokes highlight the role of agrarian discontent and rural resistance in fueling the rebellion, portraying it as a spontaneous eruption of popular anger against colonial oppression.

The Subalterns, narrate the revolt as a “people’s movement” led by different leaders in different regions irrespective of caste creed and religio. It has witnessed a people’s revolution against the domination and oppression of the British and aiming to overthrow these dominant and oppressive class from its position. Along with the the evolution of Subaltern historiography in 1982 by some prominent historians such as Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakravarty, Gyanendra Pandey etc. These historians tried to give importance on the contribution of the common people and wanted to study the history from lower stage. Subaltern studies analyse the “binary relationship” of the subaltern and ruling classes, and thus studies the interplay of dominance and subordination in colonial India.

4. CONCLUSION:

The revolt of 1857 and the coexisting debates around it led to continuous theoretical developments throughout the academia. As per this paper is concerned, after all the discussions the major findings of the research follows:

1. All of the historians cited earlier come to a common ground in the fact that the rebellion was a movement against the common enemy, i. e. British.
2. From the debates of those historians one factor can be confirmed that the rebellion was not a military debacle alone. Participation of the civilians led to the outspread of the revolt into a wider range.
3. Although the historians had contradictions regarding the connotation of this movement as ‘a national movement’. But none of them can deny the fact that the memory of this rebellion had created national consciousness among the natives even after centuries.
4. Among the debates, each of the historians acknowledged the importance of the royal leaders. Although they measured their contributions in different levels, but untidily appreciated the contributions.
5. Among the historical perceptions, each of these has some unique characteristics. But none of them can solely depict the whole scenario of the revolt of 1857. A combined study of all these debates can led to a comprehensive and deliberate holistic understanding.

To conclude, the revolt of 1857 was part of an unending academic debate. From the very outbreak of the rebellion to present context onwards historians are interpreting and re- interpreting the event as per their own understandings. Notably that, behind those interpretations’ prior assumptions and their socio-cultural identity has played a major role. Among the views on 1857 – the nationalists, the colonials, the Marxists, the subaltern are the prominent one. The interpretation of emotional damages and its long-term effects are new additions towards this topic. From the evaluation of all these aspects of these debates several key points can be picked up. As new research and study are carried out on this incident across the time more outcomes and perceptions are thought to be made. As a student of history, one should give proper attention to all of these perceptions for an overall understanding of the revolt of 1857 that had shocked the base of colonial supremacy in Indian Sub-continent.

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