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REBELLION

1857

a symposium

K. M. ASHRAF

JAMES BRYNE

CHANG CHEN-KUN

CHARLES FOURNIAN

EENOY GHOSE

P. C. GUPTA

GOPAL HALDAR

S. EHTESHAM HUSAIN

P. C. JOSHI

TALMIZ KHALDUN

LILIANA DALLE NOGARE

P. SHASTIKO

YU SHENG-WU

Edited by P. C. Joshi



People's Publishing House

1957

JULY 1957

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PRICE: Rs. 12.00

*Printed and published by D. P. Sinha, for People's
Publishing House (Private) Ltd., Asaf Ali Road,
New Delhi, at New Age Printing Press, 6/4 Asaf
Ali Road, New Delhi.*

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P r e f a c e

THE People's Publishing House decided to publish a Memorial Volume on the 1857 uprising as its contribution to the centenary celebration. Despite a very broad agreement about the national character of this century-old uprising among our patriotic intellectuals, it remains, unfortunately enough, one of the unresolved controversies of Indian history. This volume, therefore, is in the nature of a symposium and the views of each contributor are his own.

Talmiz Khaldun is an old research-worker who has worked on the subject in the National Archives. Dr. K. M. Ashraf of the Delhi University has described the outlook and contribution of the Wahabis who were an organised influential group and represented the viewpoint of the older feudal intelligentsia. Benoy Ghose has outlined the background to the critical negative attitude of the Bengali intelligentsia, which represented the then new intelligentsia endowed with modern education. I have tried to deal with the controversies with which the 1857 uprising is shrouded. I am not a professional historian and had to resort to the old-fashioned method of speaking through lengthy quotations. If I annoy the modern stylist, my only defence is that I am supplying the younger readers with documentation from older books, etc., which are not easily available to them.

The 1857 heritage played a big part in giving a patriotic orientation to Indian national literature in our various languages. It has supplied the Indian writers with dramatic incidents of suffering, struggle and sacrifice and noble patriotic themes. In the literary section, Professor P. C.

Gupta of the Allahabad University has dealt with the impact of 1857 on the Hindi literature, and Professor Ehtesham Husain of the Lucknow University on the Urdu literature. Dr. K. M. Ashraf has contributed a paper on Ghalib. Gopal Haldar, Bengali literary critic and author, has dealt with contemporary Bengali literature.

We express our heartfelt gratitude to the foreign scholars who have contributed valuable papers on the impact of 1857 in their own countries. Of special mention in this regard is James Byrne, the author of the paper on British reactions, whose sudden death has deprived us all of a keen, sympathetic and intelligent student of our history. These papers, results of painstaking research, reveal that in all these foreign lands the 1857 uprising was hailed as a national uprising of the Indian people for liberation from the British yoke and stirred feelings of solidarity in the democratic circles. We hope these foreign papers will help to write a hitherto unknown chapter in India's national history.

We thank our contributors who have made the publication of this Memorial Volume possible. Many other friends have contributed plenty of their labour of love before this volume could be got ready for the press. Our thanks to them all.

P. C. JOSHI

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The Great Rebellion

TALMIZ KHALDUN

I. INTRODUCTION

THE INDIAN MUTINY¹ has been a popular subject with historians, both British and Indian. British historians have been inclined to dismiss it as a "sepoy mutiny"² that was "wholly unpatriotic and selfish....with no native leadership and no popular support."³ Some Indian writers, on the other hand, have glorified it as a "War of Independence"⁴ in which people rose *en masse*, gave no quarter to the Firinghis⁵ and fought to the bitter end. While describing the British characterization as a result of imperial arrogance, it would be as well to bear in mind that the Indian interpretation is a product of uncritical nationalism. Both the views are extreme, and suspiciously convenient to their protagonists' interests.

The British view is too facile; it fails to explain how it was that "in the course of ten days English administration in Oudh vanished like a dream, and not left a wrack behind,"⁶ nor why "at several places the populace rose before the sepoys at those stations mutinied."⁷ Moreover, if it was a purely military insurrection, why was it deemed "necessary to punish the country people and citizens by fine and hanging for complicity in acts with which they of their own accord had nothing to do"⁸ and why did Lord Canning always "judge much more harshly those of the civil population who had been led to acts of rebellion" than the rebellious sepoys?⁹ Why did the discovery of a plan to murder

all Europeans at Nagpur synchronize with mutiny at Aurangabad,¹⁰ and why did "the revolt burst with the suddenness of an eastern tempest" and "in thousands of square miles overthrow and scatter to the winds the Company's administration which had seemed secure against any shock?"¹¹

How widespread the revolt was will become clear from the following descriptions given by the Reverend Alexander Duff, Charles Ball, and even Sir John William Kaye and Colonel G. B. Malleon, who otherwise termed it a "sepooy mutiny." According to Duff, "Never has the enemy been met without being routed, scattered, and his guns taken, but though constantly beaten he ever more rallies, and appears again ready for a fresh encounter. No sooner is one city taken or another relieved than some other one is threatened....No sooner is one district pronounced safe through the influx of British troops, than another is disturbed and convulsed. No sooner is a highway opened between places of importance, than it is again closed and all communications are for a year cut off. No sooner are the mutineers and rebels scoured out of one locality than they reappear, with double or treble forces, in another. No sooner does a mobile column force its way through hostile ranks, than they reoccupy the territory behind it. All gaps in the number of foes seem to be instantaneously filled up and no permanent clearance or impression appears anywhere to be made. The passage of our brave little armies through these swarming myriads instead of leaving deep traces of a mighty ploughshare through a roughened field seems more to resemble that of an eagle through the elastic air, or stately vessel through the unfurrowed ocean."¹² Another British historian, Charles Ball, describes the popularity of the revolt thus: "In Oudh, the rebels could march without commissariat, for the people would always feed them. They could leave their luggage without guard because the people would not attack it. They were always certain of their position and that of the British, for, the

people brought them hourly information. And no design could possibly be kept from them while secret sympathizers stood round every mess table and waited in almost every tent in the British Camp....No surprise could be effected except by a miracle, while rumours communicated from mouth outstripped even our cavalry."¹³ Kaye admits that in the areas between the rivers Ganges and Jamuna "there was scarcely a man of either faith who was not arrayed against us."¹⁴ Malleson also states that in four northern provinces—Oudh, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, and Saugar and Narbada—"the great bulk of the people rose against the British rule."¹⁵ "Oudh has been," admitted the Reverend Cave-Browne, "the focus of a rebellion, deeper and more desperate, because it was essentially popular...."¹⁶ Even in the Punjab, where no revolt took place, "the whole native community from the moneyed banker to the petty tradesman, from the government contractor to the common *coolie* stood aloof : no help, no supplies were forthcoming," till Delhi fell in the middle of September, 1857.¹⁷ According to Thomas Lowe, "the infanticide Rajput, the bigoted Brahmin, the fanatic Mussalman, and the luxury-loving, fat paunched, ambitious Mahratta.... had joined together in the cause; cow-killer, and the cow-worshipper, the pig-hater and the pig-eater, the crier of Allah is One and Muhammed is His Prophet and the mumblor of the mysteries of Brahm," had revolted conjointly.¹⁸ "It is beyond doubt," writes R. C. Dutt, "that political reasons helped a mere mutiny of soldiers to spread among large classes of the people in Northern and Central India, and converted it into a political insurrection."¹⁹ In short, the oft-voiced assertion of British historians that the rebellion of 1857 was no more than a "sepoy mutiny" is not quite the truth. In fact, within a few weeks of the breaking out of the rebellion British Empire in upper India had all but disappeared.²⁰

But merely because the rebellion was up to then the biggest upsurge against the British would not lend it the character of a war of national independence. A clear re-

futation of this assertion "lies in the fact that as soon as the mutinous troops and the rebellious chiefs were expelled from a district peace was immediately restored."²¹ Besides, this view is also historically incorrect. There was no feeling of nationalism, as we know it today, extant among the Indian people then. This lack of "nationalism" was clearly reflected in the absence of a general plan for the rebellion or a central organization for the guidance of the rebels once the rebellion broke out. The campaigns of Bakht Khan, Nana Sahib, Tatyā Tope, the Rani of Jhansi, Kunwar Singh and the Moulavi of Fyzabad were confined to narrow limits of their respective territories. There was also hardly any liaison between either the different rebel leaders^o or the centres of rebellion. On the contrary, the moment the visible vestiges of British rule seemed to disappear, conflicting regional and class loyalties of the rebel leaders as well as the masses came to the fore and, in consequence, weakened the anti-British united front.²²

The extremist Indian view is also belied by the narrow geographical scope of the rebellion. It affected hardly one-sixth of the area of the country and less than one-tenth of its population. Not only that. The rebellion, shameful though it is to admit, could not have been suppressed without the active support of Indians themselves.²³

To understand, therefore, the real nature of the rebellion, and to estimate its effects on subsequent Indian history—social, economic and political—it is essential that we investigate into the real causes, follow its course through blood and terror²⁴ and study the role played by various classes. Thus alone shall we rescue the story of the rebellion from the morass in which special pleading and interested accounts have pushed it.

II. THE CAUSES

The primary cause of the revolt was the imperialist exploitation of the Indian people. It would be well, there-

fore, to go back to the days of the founding of the East India Company. The stories of the fabulous profits being made by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French companies trading with India tempted British merchant-adventurers to form a trading company for a similar purpose. In 1600, the East India Company obtained a Charter from Queen Elizabeth I to trade with India and the Spice Islands. Trade with India in those years consisted of buying handicrafts and other valuable and artistic products from the country. As the Indian craftsmen were generally ignorant of the value of their goods in the international market, the wily and unscrupulous merchant-adventurers bought their goods for a mere trifle, and made huge profits. The dividends of the East India Company till 1765 varied from 100 to 250 per cent per annum.²⁵ This did not include the pickings of its individual agents and servants in India.²⁶ (The fact that even petty employees of the Company on their return to England could establish themselves as lords and were generally addressed as Nabobs indicates their tremendous illegal gains in this country.)

In 1765, the East India Company acquired the *Diwanee* of Bengal. By then, it had ousted all other European competitors from the Indian market. The acquisition of the *Diwanee* and the virtual monopoly of the trade with India further increased the profits of the Company and its servants, while adding heavily to the misery and privation of the people of India. Adam Smith has this to say about the *Diwanee*: "The Government of an exclusive company of merchants is perhaps the worst of all governments for any country whatever. No other sovereigns ever were or, from the nature of things, ever could be, so perfectly indifferent about the happiness or the misery of their subjects, the improvements or waste of their dominions, the glory or disgrace of their administration, as, from irresistible moral causes, the greater part of the proprietors of such a mercantile company are, and necessarily must be. It is a very singular government in which every member of the admi-

nistration wishes to get out of the country, and consequently to have done with the government as soon as he can and to whose interest the day after he has left it and carried his whole fortune with him, it is perfectly indifferent though the whole country was swallowed up by an earthquake."²⁷ According to William Bolts "while this (British) nation is gazing after the fruit, the Company and their substitutes are suffered to be rooting up the tree.... The Company, if left to pursue its present system, will ruin itself; the possessions in Bengal will be beggared...."²⁸ Holmes remarks that "the native administrators oppressed the peasants and embezzled the revenue. The servants of the Company found it profitable to connive at the abuses...."²⁹

The inevitable result of the accumulation in England of the wealth of plunder was that it became, along with similar other accumulations, the basis of capitalist enterprise in that country. Marx observes that "chartered companies were powerful instruments in promoting.... concentration of wealth.... the treasures obtained outside Europe by direct looting, enslavement and murder, flowed to the motherland (metropolitan country) in streams and were there turned into capital."³⁰ Brooks Adams, while agreeing with Marx, remarks cynically: "Had Watt lived fifty years earlier, he and his invention must have perished together," for lack of sufficient capital to set them working.³¹

Thus, while according to the terms of the original Charter, the East India Company was "not to exchange as far as possible the manufactured goods of England for the products of India but to carry the manufactures and commodities of India and Europe,"³² acts of Parliament were passed in 1700 and 1721 absolutely prohibiting, with a few specified exceptions, "the employment of printed or dyed calicoes in England, either in dress or in furniture, and use of any printed dyed goods, of which cotton formed any part."³³ It was a penal offence to wear wrought silk or printed or dyed calicoes from India, Persia and China. The penalty was up to £200.³⁴ "Had India been independent she

would have retaliated, would have imposed prohibitive duties upon British goods, and would thus have preserved her own productive industry. This act of self-defence was not permitted her; she was at the mercy of a foreign ruler. British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty, and the foreign manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could not have contended on equal terms."³⁵ This happened at a time, when, due to the East India Company's policy of territorial aggrandizement and annexation, the chief source of demand for Indian goods—the native courts—were disappearing from the Indian scene. The process of decay began by the establishment of foreign rule and helped by the force of foreign influence, was completed by the competition of foreign goods.

The Industrial Revolution in England completely transformed the character of her relations with India. The expansion of British manufacture overwhelmed and ultimately destroyed the primitive Indian industry and converted the country into a source for raw material. India became a major market for British goods. The condition of the uprooted artisans and craftsmen became miserable. Lord William Bentinck wrote to the Court of Directors that their "misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India."³⁶ The population of Dacca—renowned throughout the world for the fine quality of muslin that they produced—decreased from 150,000 to 20,000 between 1827 and 1837.³⁷

The transformation in trade relations had severe repercussions on the Indian social structure. The uprooted artisans fell back upon agriculture.³⁸ There was no possibility of the growth of a modern industrial system within the orbit of imperial relations. But there was considerable pressure on land already, and it could not sustain more: with the primitive implements available, intensive agriculture was out of the question. Also, there was the heavy incidence of the new system of land revenue. In Bengal land revenue,

which stood at £811,000 in 1764-65 was increased to £ 1,740,000 in 1765-66, the first year of the *Diwanee*.³⁹

During the Hindu and the Muslim rule the "King's Share" was a proportion of the year's produce and was surrendered as a tribute of tax by the peasant joint-owners of a self-governing village community to the ruler or his nominee. "The soil in India belonged to the tribe or its subdivision—the village community, the clan or the brotherhood settled in the village—and never was considered as the property of the King.... Either in feudal or imperial scheme there never was any notion of the ownership of the soil vesting in anybody except the peasantry."⁴⁰ Under the Company's rule it was assumed that the state was the supreme landlord. In place of the traditional share of the government in the produce paid by the village communities as a whole, there was introduced a system of fixed payment in cash assessed on land which had no reference to good or bad harvest or to how much of the land was cultivated. In most cases the assessment was individual, either levied directly on the cultivator or on landlords appointed by the government. With the individual's land being directly assessed, the village community lost its economic function. Even where groups of owners or village communities were recognised as proprietors of land the results were not very different, because the responsibility was collective only in name. There was a strong trend towards individual assessment, and in practice, co-proprietors were treated as individual proprietors who could sell or mortgage their land.⁴¹ "Our policy has been," Sir John Strachey wrote, "to encourage the growth of private property in land.... (though) former governments hardly recognised the existence of such property."⁴²

The right of private ownership of land resulted in indebtedness, because "when there was no such right, there was, comparatively speaking, no credit; there was no adequate security that a landlord desirous of borrowing could offer, and there was, therefore, less indebtedness."⁴³ Though

mortgages were not infrequent, permanent alienations were unknown; a man could not be deprived of his inheritance for debts due either to the state or to any individual.

Under the operation of the Company's law, however, the village was usually in debt from the zamindar downwards and of all creditors the Bannia was the most pitiless.⁴⁴ It could not be otherwise. The Company's law not only gave protection to him; it also gave him land as security for his claims. "What is sad to acknowledge," writes Mark Thornhill, "by its cumbrous procedure, by its delays, and by its expensiveness, it (the new legal system) gave him (the Bannia) the means of fabricating these claims. So great were the facilities it afforded in this way, that forged documents, and false witnesses became almost stock in trade of a successful Bannia, as his account books or his commodities."⁴⁵ Moreover, a Bannia could now afford to be rapacious. Unlike in the days of native rule, his extortions could not be limited by the risk of drastic retaliation. The effect of this change in the legal system was that more land changed hands in one generation than ever before in memory. The ancient proprietors gave place to new owners, mostly Bannias.⁴⁶ These auction-purchasers, Kaye contends, dwelt principally in the cities.⁴⁷ They desired only to gain profit out of their investment unlike the old proprietors, people belonging to the soil essentially, who had loved their land for itself, independent of the rent it afforded them.⁴⁸

For the Court of Directors of the Company, too, the land was no more than merchandize, and its sale was authorised in 1776, in default of payment on the part of the zamindars with whom the government contracts were made.⁴⁹ "Under the (new) system," Kaye writes, "men who had been proprietors of vast tracts of country as far as the eye could reach shrivelled into tenants of mud huts and possessors only of a few cooking pots."⁵⁰

But the new system had its own inherent weaknesses. The Company could never be sure of the income from its

dominions. To overcome this uncertainty, Lord Cornwallis wrote to the Court of Directors on August 2, 1789: "It would be necessary for the public good to grant a right of property in the soil to them (zamindars) not as mere revenue agents of the state (which they had always been) but as landlords in the English sense....The outlines of the plan now proposed are well calculated to secure and even increase your revenue."⁵¹

The hopes that had been painted by Lord Cornwallis were too rosy. The Court of Directors gave its consent to the proposal of Permanent Settlement without much ado, and the revenue settlement of Bengal was declared permanent in 1793. According to Sir Richard Temple, the Permanent Settlement was "a measure which was affected to naturalize the landed institutions of England among the natives of Bengal."⁵² But by this measure, as Lord Metcalfe observed, the ancient rights of the ryot "were virtually destroyed by the title of property conferred by us on those who had no pretensions to it."⁵³

Even under the Permanent Settlement estates were "liable to be sold in default of payment under the provisions of Act I of 1845."⁵⁴ Holmes writes in the *History of Indian Mutiny* that the result of Cornwallis' action was that "the inferior tenants derived from it no benefit whatever. The zamindars again and again failed to pay their rent charges; and their estates were sold for the benefit of the government."⁵⁵ The collector of Midnapore wrote in 1802, that a few years of the "system of sale and attachment" had reduced most of the great zamindars in Bengal "to distress and beggary and produced a greater change in the landed property of Bengal than has, perhaps, ever happened in the same space of time in any age or country by the mere effect of internal regulations."⁵⁶

Another consequence of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal was the subdivision of rights in land. The zamindars leased out their interests to the middlemen, and the middlemen leased out in turn, creating a long chain of rent recei-