Blowing from Guns in British India.

1857 Indian Uprising

By Whitney Howarth

In 1857, uprisings and rebellions ended the British East India Company's (EIC) control in India, then it became an official British colony. Historians continue to debate the nature of these uprisings.

Imperialism in South Asia

In 1783, Great Britain, stinging from the American Revolution and loss of thirteen promising colonies, took a closer look at the Indian subcontinent. The British East India Company (EIC) intensified its efforts to collect taxes and dominate territories in this vast, populous region. Sometimes simply called "the Company" the EIC was indeed a business that did international trade. But it also conquered and ruled over an increasing number of Mughal territories and independent princely states, so its "business" was pretty much imperialism. Under a policy called the Doctrine of Lapse, the EIC took control over more than twenty-five states in India in the 1800's. The British deemed the rulers of those states "incompetent" or lacking in a proper heir, which was convenient if you wanted to take over. The Company ruled many of these states directly, and any resistance to EIC's control was met with a military response. That included British troops as well as thousands of locally-recruited Indian troops called *sepoys*. Let's look at the expansion of British control on the Indian subcontinent and the differing perspectives of the 1857 uprising by Indians against "the Company".

Sepoy Soldiers

If you were a young man in India needing an honest job that paid well, joining the Company army as a sepoy would have been appealing. However, once employed you would soon be faced with racial discrimination and your religious beliefs would be challenged by EIC policies. Whether Muslim or Hindu, you and your fellow sepoys would be expected to adapt your religions and culture to the needs of the army. Also, you could forget about ever being promoted to higher ranks in the army, because only your British co-workers would get those jobs.

Sepoys helped expand the domination of the East India Company across South Asia and were shipped abroad to expand the British Empire overseas. By the 1800s, the Mughal Empire was a much smaller and weaker state, whose authority was recognized only by some princes and local governors. Most stopped supporting the Mughal army and paying taxes. The central authority of the Mughals was so weak they could offer little resistance to the East India Company and its increasingly massive sepoy army.

By the mid-1800s, many Indians, including a number of sepoys, were frustrated with living under EIC control. Excessive taxation, mismanagement, racist regulations, and the continuing disrespect for local and religious customs were becoming intolerable. In 1857, a series of uprisings broke out in and around several military stations. These rebellions expressed various outrages that had troubled many communities for decades.

The Spark that Lit the Fire

The first of these uprisings was in May 1857, at a *cantonment* (military station) called Meerut, 40 miles outside the capital city of Delhi. Interestingly, the most heated issue—among many—had to do with how you loaded your gun. Stories had been spreading that the new bullet cartridges for their new Enfield rifles were being greased with animal fat derived from pigs and cows. The greased cartridges had to be opened by biting off the top with your teeth. However, nearly every sepoy was either Muslim—a religion that forbids eating the fat or any other part of a pig, or Hindu—where the same rule applies to cows. The British in India had long showed insensitivity for cultural and religious traditions, and that disturbed both the sepoys and civilians. Many worried that the foreigners wanted to forcibly convert them to Christianity. When some of the sepoys, in religious observation, disobeyed orders to sink their teeth into the fat-greased ammunition, they were sentence to prison.

As several sepoys rose up to free their comrades, some British officers were killed. Violence quickly spread and several European women and children were also killed. Crowds in Meerut attacked and killed off-duty military officers as well as several non-British servants who tried to protect their British masters. The next day, the sepoys

reached Delhi and mobbed the British arsenal and the home of former Mughal Emperor. Rebel soldiers and anti-British civilians called for the re-instatement of the old Mughal Emperor who reluctantly agreed to their demands.

News spread fast, inspiring more mutinies in other garrison[1] towns and disturbances in districts across the north and northeast of India. By the end, over 50,000 sepoys had died or were executed later, whether or not they were guilty of participating in the revolt. Another 100,000 civilians were killed by British efforts to put down the rebellion and take revenge. The chaos that followed also contributed to a major famine that killed even more people.

English engraving from 1857 showing mutinous sepoys dividing up spoils. Public domain.

That doesn't mean all of India was rebelling. Many sepoys and garrisons remained loyal to the British and helped to put down the rebellion while supporting British troops that were shipped in. From Punjab to Nepal, people of different religions and languages joined the rebellion. When the Mughal emperor's sons were captured by the British outside Delhi, they were executed without a trial. These and other atrocities of vengeance continued across India as the British sought to punish rebels and terrify communities that had sheltered them. The British sought to create a campaign of fear and terror to make sure no one would challenge British authority again.

It took a full year for the British to put down the revolt and re-establish its control over Indian society. By 1858, the East India Company no longer governed India and the East India Company was dissolved by the British. The British Queen Victoria became the sole sovereign of the subcontinent and India became an official colony of the British Empire for nearly 100 more years.

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1 A *garrison* is a group of troops stationed in a town for the purpose of defending it. The word can also refer to the building those troops occupy.

Mutiny, Revolt, or War of Independence?

The revolts that took place in 1857-1858 continue to interest historians. Many debate the causes, consequences, and what to even *call* these events. Was it a war for independence by the Indians? A mutiny of sepoy soldiers against the British? A larger rebellion against the East India Company and Great Britain? Each answer represents a point of view.

Some Indian nationalists say this was an organized revolution to gain independence from British rule. It was seen as a singular revolt of colonial subjects against foreign imperialists. However, many scholars of Indian history see these events differently, arguing that India wasn't a nation yet. It had never been a fully unified state with a singular system of government nor was there a common national identity with well-defined boundaries.

We know that there were many reasons people rebelled against the British EIC. Some fought to protect the markets of cotton cloth weavers, some fought to end the heavy tax burdens for landlords, and still others fought in response to new land laws which forced the eviction of poor peasants from lands. Some rebels also fought to stop the annexation of *their* princely states—the "doctrine of lapse" referred to in the introduction—while others fought to cease the increasing influence of Christian missionaries.

In fact, scholars have long debated the role of religion in the events of 1857. While most agree that this uprising was not motivated by religious freedom, religion still mattered. One group of rebels put forth a proclamation in August of 1857 asking Hindus and Muslims to join together. The plan was to overthrow the British and re-instate Mughal imperial authority.

JUSTICE.

A political cartoon from the British magazine Punch from 1857 showing the British perspective of the 1857 uprising with "Britannia"—representing Great Britain—killing the natives, justice as revenge! Public domain.

At the time, a variety of social groups had significant roles in challenging imperialist power systems. At the time, the British failed to acknowledge the wide-spread economic problems caused by de-industrialization. British responses to the mutiny were often racist, characterizing Indian troops as inferior and violent. Accounts from the period tended to paint Hindus and Muslims as religious fanatics, and also regarded Indian violence as a primitive impulse, rather than a response to oppression.

British sources—both then and now—often refer to the 1857 events as The Sepoy Mutiny. They focus primarily on the discontent of sepoys in the East Indian Company army and their rebellion against their commanding officers. While these explanations usually do acknowledge that some peasants and landlords supported the rebel troops, they generally frame these events as a military matter that impacted a few others.

Outcomes and Legacies

Although the East India Company lost its authority in India and was later dissolved, the racial abuses and economic hardships that Indians experienced did not improve. Britain would continue its rule, but no longer through the EIC. Queen Victoria issued a proclamation to the peoples and princes of India in 1858 promising no further interference in religious traditions or matters relating to succession. Nevertheless, the British continued to distrust native peoples, especially Muslims, whom they blamed for the rebellion. This led the new governing authorities to create policies that insured inequality and supported racist justifications for colonial rule, or more accurately, misrule.

Communities who had remained loyal in 1857 were labeled "martial races" by the British government and recruited heavily for the Indian Army. Yet they were not given much independence in the ranks, and were always under the authority of a larger number of British officers. Most Indians were kept from advancing into higher posts within the military and civilian services. The British created a new system of urban planning that focused on the segregation of whites from native people. The bureaucracy of the state was expanded with new government offices and more policing, surveillance, and regulation of native peoples. In the years to come, Western educated native elites would struggle for recognition and representation within the military and civil service. The British were hesitant to give representation or autonomy to people they deemed "savage" at worst, and at best "unworthy" of self-governance.

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