

1857 Phenomenon: A National Uprising or a Religious War?

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Abstract

Jose in his lucid yet critical style takes on the prevalent notions on 1857 for a rethink. He is equally critical of the western/European interpretation of the event as well as that of the nationalist schools attempts at glorifying the event. These critical explorative inroads into the much acclaimed historical legacy of 1857 for a modern nation stand to gain from especially the renewed interests in historiography.

Keywords: Nationalism, Religion, Warfare, Fundamentalism

Introduction

The first news of the Mutiny to reach the Governor General, Lord Canning, in Calcutta was in the form of a private telegram from the post master of Meerut to his aunt in Agra. The wording of the telegram was as follows:

Cavalry have risen...setting fire to houses...having killed or wounded all Europeans they could find...If Aunt intends starting tomorrow evening please detain her.¹

The revolt of 1857 broke out just one hundred years after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The celebration to mark the 150th anniversary of the 1857 revolt, instead of being a mere nostalgic trip to the past, should be an occasion for reflecting on the present in the light of the lessons of that momentous event. There are ample number of historiographies on the themes of 1857. There are two main views regarding the origin and character of the revolt. Sir John Lawrence held that it was mere military rising. It had its origin in the army and its main cause was the affair of greased cartridges and nothing else. According to John Seely also, it was a wholly unpatriotic and selfish Sepoy mutiny with no native leadership of popular support.² Sir James Outram was of opinion that it was the result of a Mohammedan conspiracy making capital out of Hindu grievances.³ The Indian nationalists describe the mutiny as a war of Indian independence and it was an organized attempt made by the national leaders of India to combine themselves into a single command with the sole object of driving out the British power from India in order that a single, unified, politically free and sovereign state may be established. Savarkar advocated this view in his famous book called *War*

1 John Langdon, Davis, *The Indian Mutiny*, A Collection of Contemporary documents compiled and edited by Jackdaw Publication, London, Thirty Bedford Square, 1969, Collection No. 2.

2 L.P. Sharma, *History of Modern India*, New Delhi, Konark, Publishers, p. 20.

3 *Ibid.*

of *Indian Independence*. Thus, V.D. Savarkar, who was perhaps the first Indian to write about 1857 in 1909, called it the Indian war of independence.⁴ His pro-nationalist stance made Savarkar look with contempt and reject the British assertion that attributed the war to the greased cartridges. While the popular emotional association surrounding 1857 acclaim it as the first full-blown instance of anti-imperialist resistance, academic interpretation of its objectives and the reading of the composition of the rebels and their leaders have changed considerably in the last 150 years. The event of 1857 can therefore be read in a number of ways.

The revolt of 1857 has been considered both as a simple sepoy Mutiny as well as the first war of independence. While 1857 cannot be easily dismissed as a revolt of a few disgruntled sepoys, for there was mass involvement in several places, it can neither be seen as the birth of the modern nationalist movement. This is because the movement of 1857 lacked an all India character, a commonality of purpose and a vision towards a different future of Indian society.⁵ The struggles of 1857, as so many other similar ones, contained no vision of the future society as distinguished from their immediate past; they were, implicitly or explicitly, attempts to re-establish the old order and their antagonism with the British was largely based on race, colour, and religious difference. It is quite evident from the following proclamation issued by the mutineers at Delhi as published in the *London Times* on 31st August 31, 1857:

It is well known that in these days all the English have entertained these evil designs - first, to destroy the religion of the whole Hindustani army, and then to make the people Christian by compulsion. Therefore we, solely on account of our religion, have combined with the people, and have not spared alive one infidel, and have re-established the Delhi dynasty on these terms, and thus act in obedience to orders and receive double pay. Hundreds of guns and a large amount of treasure have fallen into our hands; therefore it is fitting that whoever of the soldiers and people dislike turning Christians should unite with one heart and act courageously, not leaving the seed of these infidels remaining... it is further necessary that all Hindus and Mussalmans unite in this struggle.⁶

Race antagonism cannot by itself be the foundation of modern nationalism, though the former does play a role in almost all manifestations of the latter. When our over-enthusiastic nationalist historians paint a picture of objective antagonism between what is Indian on the one hand, and what is British on the other, as two monoliths, tracing the core of the antagonism to the fact of being Indian or British, they are betting on the wrong horse, a racist one, in the race of nationalism.

Nationalism is a condition of mind, feeling or consciousness of a group of people living in a well-defined geographical area, speaking a common language, possessing a literature in which the longing on the nation have been expressed, sharing common

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *The Times*, Daily Newspaper, 31st August, 1857, p. 5.

tradition and, in some cases, having a common religion.⁷ It should be emphasized that this is a rough definition and there are exceptions to every point in it. But we may say that as a rule most of them have to be present before a feeling of nationalism can arise. In the 19th century the doctrine of nationalism included two beliefs: first, that each nationality should form a united independent sovereign state and, second, that every national state could demand of its citizens not only unquestioning obedience and complete loyalty, not only exclusive patriotism but also an unshakable faith in the supreme excellence of his/her own nationality over all other nationalities and a pride in its characteristics and its destiny.

The consciousness of nationhood was a prolonged, painstaking process requiring clear understanding and articulation. Consequently, Indian nationhood was not an event; India was a nation in the making.⁸ From the study of the process of nation-making in India, it also becomes clear that there was a basic difference in the process of nation-formation and rise of nationalism in Europe, on the one hand, and in India and other colonial and semi-colonial countries on the other.⁹ In Europe, nations and nationalism arose as a result of the breakdown of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, as the Marxists hold, or the rise of modern industry, as Ernest Gellner holds. In any case, it is the bourgeoisie, often with the support of the absolutist monarchy which works for a unified market, leading to the birth of the nation-state and nationalism. Moreover, nations in Europe were based on ethnicity or an ethnic-core. The nation was formed around language and culture; or rather the unified language and culture were basic element in the formation of the nation. According to Bipan Chandra nationalism in India and other colonies and semi-colonies, was born out of the movements against colonialism.

The difference between the processes of nation formation in Europe and in the colonies arose from the fact that the basic social contradictions, which gave birth to nationalism and the process of nation-formation and hence the nation, were different in the two cases. The difference between the European path and the Indian path of nation formation also enables us to define the nation in the specific Indian historical context. The Indian nation means the coming into being of the Indian people as a historical entity. The discussion so far makes it clear that the role of specific history is crucial to any account or analysis of nation formation.

In India, nation and nationalism was not the product of nor based on ethnicity or common race or blood, language, religion or culture, nor of the rise of capitalism or modern industry. Though aided by centuries of historical development, nation and nationalism were basically the product of the colonial impact and the anti-colonial struggle for freedom. Colonialism provided new uniting bonds to the Indian people.

7 Louis L. Snyder, *The Making of Modern Man*, London, D. Van Nostrand Company, Ltd., 1967.

8 Bipan Chandra Mridula Mukerjee, *et al*; *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, p. 23.

9 G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 127-169.

As a result of the colonial impact, Indians increasingly shared common interest, that is, common economic and political condition of existence.¹⁰ Perhaps no nation would have been formed and Indians would have just remained the inhabitants of a geographical entity, without the anti-colonial struggle. The 19th century imperialist view, which still finds some reflection in historical writings, that India was not only not a nation in the 19th century but was not capable of becoming one, that no process of nation formation was going on in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and that what was called the Indian nation was really a conglomerate of its elite united in their self-interest.

William Dalrymple in his book *The last Mughal: the fall of a Dynasty Delhi, 1857*, describes 1857 rebellion as a clash of rival fundamentalism.¹¹ On the imperial British side, this fundamentalism was represented by the evangelical missionaries and the utilitarians, Dalrymple is certainly right in pointing out that religious sentiments are assigned considerable prominence in the documents that emerged from the side of the rebels, who were replacing, in growing numbers, the early British, whom Dalrymple calls the White Mughals.¹² Gradually these white Mughals were replaced by persons like John Jennings who believed that the British were in India by divine providence to convert the vile heathens to the fold of Christianity. If it were the evangelical Christian missionaries and their advocates in the company administration who represented the imperial British side of fundamentalism, on the side of the vanquished Indians, it was the Wahabi Muslims believers in puritan and orthodox Islam. The rebellion of 1857 was according to Dalrymple, a clash between these rival fundamentalisms, between the arrogant aggressive evangelical Christians and the intolerant wahabis.¹³ It is true that the rebels frequently described their resistance as jihad. Dalrymple is certainly right in pointing out that religious sentiments are assigned considerable prominence in the documents that emerged from the side of the rebels. Most of their proclamations, particularly those coming from the political leadership were, religious grievances, of political and economic import. The *Jihadis* portray the conflict with the British exclusively in religious terms, but there too, the agenda is scarcely fundamentalist, for there is an equal emphasis on Hindu Muslim unity.¹⁴

According to Savarkar, *Swarajya* is worthless without *swadharma*, and *swadharma* is powerless without *Swarajya*.¹⁵ Once the relation between religion and self-rule had been established, the only thing that mattered was killing the British in order to approximate to the essence. The British were the foe in this instance. Here too, Savarkar makes no distinction between the British and Christianity. Hindus and Muslims were

10 *Ibid.*

11 Farhat Hasan, 'Religious Shade of a Rebellion', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, May 12, 2007, 16-81.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 Jyotirmaya Sharma, "History as revenge and retaliation: Re-reading Savakar's The War of Independence of 1857", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 12, 2007, 17-18.

allies in 1857 against a common enemy, the British, a fact that Savarkar constantly emphasizes. Savarkar appreciated the way in which Maulvis and pundits preached jihad against the British Christians in 1857. There is jubilation in Savarkar's account at every instance of a church being felled, a cross being smashed and every Christian being sliced.¹⁶ If the imperative was to establish the supremacy of religion and attain self-rule, the pursuit of this goal sanctioned killing. In his reading of 1857, Savarkar justifies the killing of countless British women and children by taking cue from what he calls the tactics of Maratha warfare. In Delhi, the rebels went like fearsome demons to the house of Rev. Jennings, killed him, but also his young daughter and another lady guest of theirs.¹⁷

Any reappraisal of 1857 therefore is also an opportunity to evaluate the terrifying set of proposition introduced by Savarkar into the Indian political vocabulary.

It is true that the Britishers were convinced that their religion was the only true one; they had not understood the depth of other people's religious convictions. The British had many warnings of the danger of treating Indian religious beliefs lightly. In 1806, British officers, feeling that Muslim soldiers would not look smart enough if they wore beards or Sepoys if they wore sect marks on their foreheads, ordered these things to be done away with.¹⁸ In 1824 war broke out in Burma, and Hindu regiments refused to go there because their religion forbade them to cross any sea. The commander-in-chief visited the disaffected troops and had them shot or hung.

There were also other matters, of vital importance to the Indians, which the British disregarded. For instance, a few years before the Mutiny a hospital was built for sick persons irrespective of creed or social position.¹⁹ The authorities said that all sick persons high and low could attend, and forbade treatment by Indian doctors. Ignorant people imagined that this was another way in which the British intended to take away their dignity and their honor. Whenever roads were built, sometimes upsetting the temple, that was regarded as a means of destroying sacred places rather than as a means of improving communications. When starving children were rescued by orphanages it was regarded as a plot to make them Christians.²⁰

On the Indian side, things were made difficult by the fanaticism of those who really believed in the minutiae of their religions and insisted against all odds on remaining faithful to them.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ John Langdon, Davis, *A Collection of Contemporary Documents* compiled and edited by, Jackdaw Publication, London, Collection No. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, No. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, No. 4.

The Indian sub-continent still has many problems: among them the foremost is the unrest between the two states into which it is now divided, the Muslim state of Pakistan and the Hindu state of the Indian Union. Before 1857 these two great religious groups were not hostile to one another. It seems then that even the division of India into two nations may owe its origin to the mutiny. The unity magnified in the 1857 between Hindus and Muslims was only artificial. It was only an opportunist alliance against the other. Since India is a nation in the making harping too much on the memories of 1857 can be dangerous. The recall of the saga of the march of Hindu and Muslim sepoys to Delhi to nominate the Mughal emperor the leader of their uprising against the colonial rulers breathes a whiff of religious harmony in today's communally surcharged atmosphere. But let us also not forget that the 1857 insurrection was conceived and executed under the deadweight of a dying tradition. Neither let us forget that it was not executed on the basis of democracy and civil rights, nor for human rights which are needed for nation building. Along with a critical view of Savarkar, there is also the need, therefore, to examine the content of such terms as nationalism and patriotism used frequently these days to justify inflamed states of emotion and violence.