

1857 in Eastern India: A Lacuna in Historiography

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Abstract

Rai attempts to recount some major incidents in the eastern part of India associated with the rebellion of 1857 as to claim that the region unlike earlier claims was not all that complacent nor slumbering during the major events of the year, but rather, did show different levels of participation by way of igniting the discontent that prevailed for various reasons in these parts.

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Introduction

In the biography of the Indian nation there have been moments which transcended the limits of immediacy and the Revolt of 1857 was one such moment. For both the colonizers and the colonized the Revolt of 1857 was a defining event, although for different reasons. As a Briggs rightly suggests “no single event more powerfully affected the mind of that generation than the Indian Mutiny in 1857.” The Revolt was the most comprehensive challenge to the legitimacy of the British rule and this was one of an elemental fear that dominated official concerns. As Basudeb Chattopadhyay puts it “From Lytton in 1870s through General Dyer in 1918 to Tottenham in 1942 the spectre of the Revolt of 1857 haunted the administrators whenever they were called upon to deal with a mass upsurge.”¹

However both the imperialist and nationalist historians have left out eastern India from the purview of historiography. Though the Revolt is said to have been started from Barrackpore in Bengal on 29th March 1857 yet the question arises as to why only northern and central parts of India have received more importance and been a subject of discussion among historians. It has been generally assumed that the mutinous conduct of Mangal Pandey of 34th Native Infantry on March 29, 1857 was an isolated act of individual bravado caused by religious intentional insults to the sentiments. This event only provided spark which turned into wildfire in parts of northern and central India. Bengal and the regions further east remained firmly ensconced in loyalist fold.

Though Eastern India did not constitute the epicentre of the great political earthquake yet it did not altogether immune from its shockwave either as mentioned in the text books. Sir Frederick James Halliday, the first Lieutenant Governor of

1 Basudeb Chattopadhyaya, “The Revolt of 1857 in Eastern India: An Overview”, in *People's Democracy (Weekly Organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist))*, Vol. XXXI, No. 31, August 2005, 2007.

Bengal, compiled the earliest comprehensive overview of events in eastern India. He remarked “hardly a single district under the government of Bengal has escaped either actual danger or serious apprehensions of danger.”² Although the path and intensity of the movement in each region was regulated by its own specificities the Revolt of 1857 was indeed of a truly sub-continental dimension. And Eastern India was no exception. On the basis of abundant documentation available in regional archives, it is possible to reconstruct a supplementary narrative of the revolt, which would redress the perceived imbalance in its historiography.

Bengal in the Revolt of 1857

The earliest signs of disquiet among the sepoys were evident in Dum Dum in January 1857. Rumours started circulating among the sepoys in Dum Dum that the cartridges of the new Enfield Rifle, has been greased with cow and pig fat. Since the cartridges had to be bitten off before loading, there developed a firm conviction among the sepoys that it was a conspiracy to convert them to Christianity. From Dum Dum rumours spread Barrackpore the headquarters of the Presidency division of the army. In late January Major General John Hearsay, who was in charge of the Division, noticed a growing “ill-feeling” in the minds of the sepoys of the regiments at Barrackpore and that the English at Barrackpore would be exploded anytime.

The suspicion going on in Barrackpore turned into a belief at Behrampore. Behrampore was a military station and the 19th Native Infantry and a corps of Irregular Cavalry was posted. The administration here became anxious on account of two things. One was its proximity to Murshidabad, the residence of the Nawab Nazim (descendant of the nawabs of Bengal) whose support, it was apprehended could turn the scale in favour of the rebels. The other cause was the absence of any European troops in the town or in its vicinity. The intemperate handling of the situation and reported threat to send the errant sepoys to Burma by Colonel Mitchell aggravated an already volatile situation resulting in the mutiny of the 19th Regiment and later it was disbanded. This was indeed the first recorded instance of the mutiny of the sepoys in Bengal in 1857.

In March the focus shifted from Behrampore back again to Barrackpore. General Hearsay was aware of the tension in the cantonment but what he failed to appreciate was the sepoy lines to some “designing scoundrels” such as the *Dharma Sabha* people in Calcutta, who poisoned the minds of gullible sepoys. General Hearsay failed to see beyond blind religious fury and was taken by surprise when Mangal Pandey fired at a European officer and his comrades refused to arrest him when ordered by their European superiors. Thereupon Mangal Pandey was executed after a court martial and the seven companies of the 34th Regiment stations at Barrackpore were disbanded.

In case these drastic steps affect the morale of other cantonments in Bengal, the

government issued a proclamation on 16 May disavowing any intention to tamper with the observance of religion and caste of the sepoy. Outside agencies were held responsible for tampering with the "habitual loyalty and orderly conduct of the sepoy." To Canning they were ignorant and childish, but excitable sepoy. There were rumours going on that some of these soldiers who were out of employment did not return to their native districts in Western Bihar or UP, but hovered around the vicinity of Barrackpore. The European community became unnerved at the information regarding the events in Meerut and Delhi which had already been trickling into Calcutta. They now apprehended that in the event of the disbanded sepoy descending on the city, the native police would be of no use and moreover the followers of Wajid Ali Shah who along with the entourage was then living in Garden Reach, in the south western suburb of the city might join hands with the rebellious sepoy. Thereupon Lord Canning formed the Corps of Volunteer Guards of Calcutta to arm sections of the white population of Calcutta in order to guard against the rebellious sepoy and distrusted police.

Because of all these rumours, there were persistent demands for position of European guards in Calcutta. But due to the dispatch of troops to Banaras and Allahabad Canning could not overstretch his slender resources. General Hearsay informed Lord Canning that the sepoy at Barrackpore had decided to rise in revolt on the night of June 13. The Europeans in Calcutta believed in the rumours that an uprising had actually taken place in Barrackpore the previous night and that the rebels were marching towards Calcutta. They feared that if they succeeded in reaching the city, the deposed Nawab of Awadh's men would join them and no European house would be spared. Hence from the morning of June 14 the European quarters of the city was firmly in the grip of a panic. There was another panic in July caused by the reported purchase and concealment of a large number of arms by the natives. In view of the prevailing sense of panic, an act was promulgated for the licensing of arms. These might have allayed the apprehensions of the Europeans but for the fact that throughout the months of June - July there were sporadic reports of desertion and mutiny of Indian sepoy in Murshidabad and Behrampore. In the context of reports of the early English reverses in Delhi these disparate incidents of mutiny of sepoy in Bengal caused considerable consternation among the Europeans in Bengal.

Beyond Bengal

Besides Calcutta, panic reactions were witnessed in Bihar also. Apart from events associated with Kunwar Singh in Shahabad, rebellion of the Ramghur Battalion of Chota Nagpur and discontent in the Danapur cantonment, the city of Patna also experienced the heat of the Revolt. The Zamindars of Parahat who was initially hesitant to join the Revolt later, joined the Revolt under compulsion from the peasants of Bihar. Several other districts in Bihar witnessed mutiny of and desertions by sepoy. The Company tried in vain to enlist the support of the rural elites. In August 1857, it admitted "with

the exception of the Rajah of Bettiah and Hutwah, no native chief has come forward to aid the government." Thus it appears that the mutiny and rebellion in Bihar badly needs its historian.³

In Bengal, the Special Narrative on the mutiny mentions the mutinous behaviour of the sepoys of the 73rd Native Infantry stationed at Jalpaiguri and Rajshahi Division of North Bengal. In July a plan was hatched by some sepoys of the 73rd Native Infantry Jalpaiguri to murder European officers at that station. The rebels were sent to Calcutta for court martial. Even in far-off Darjeeling a sepoy of Darjeeling sappers was sentenced to imprisonment for seditious conversation. There were reports that the sepoys at Jalpaiguri were in communication with the Bhutias. Emissaries were sent to Bhutan to find out the possible linkage between the Bhutias and the 73rd Native Infantry. Enquiries were made about the attitudes of the hill chiefs of Khasi and Jainta Hills in view of a rumour prevalent there regarding the fall of the British power. The annexation of Indian states by the British prior to 1857 was a prime factor in the origins of the sepoy and feudal revolt. Apparently the Assamese and the Khasi-Jaintia's concerns of the political control of their states too was a significant explanation why they too were to become involved in the uprising. In Assam as in other parts of India the instigation of the sepoys to mutiny and their leadership was taken over by the disgruntled aristocracy, though the mutiny did not assume serious dimensions as it did elsewhere in north India. There does not appear to have been much popular support in both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and in the Khasi-Jaintia hills. Nevertheless it is clear that the region was affected by the events of 1857-58, which was a reflection of the widespread discontent against British colonial rule.

East Bengal too was affected by the Revolt. When news of the mutiny at Meerut reached Chittagong in November 1857, 300 sepoys of the 34th Native Infantry posted in the port town mutinied. They looted the Collector's office, took 3 elephants freed prisoner and marched towards Sylhet through Tripura. It is interesting to note that the mutiny was not accompanied by physical violence against the Europeans. None of the European residents were injured. From Chittagong the mutineers headed towards the princely state of Tripura. The Raja Tripura was accordingly instructed to prevent the onward movement of the mutineers and to apprehend them if possible. Having spent a few days in the hills and jungles of Tripura they tried to enter into Cachar and thereafter to Manipur. It is inferred that the rebels of Chittagong received some support from the local population, especially hill tribes of the region. The nexus that the rebels were able to develop with the hill-tribes such as Kukis and with Manipuri princes or Chera chiefs, is an interesting story that would need careful investigation. The Chittagong mutineers were either killed or apprehended towards the close of 1857 and the early months of 1858.

3 Cf. Sabayasachi Bhattacharya(Ed.), *Rethinking 1857*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2007.

The Chittagong mutiny also had somewhat unanticipated impact on Dacca also. On 21 November 1857 when the intelligence of the Chittagong mutiny reached Dacca, the district administration, in consultation with the military authorities decided that as a precautionary measure the sepoys were to be disarmed. At the daybreak of the following morning the guards on duty at public buildings were disarmed without any resistance. But when the officers reached the sepoy lines at Lalbagh, they found the sepoys and the native artillery opposed them. After a sharp exchange of gunfire, which lasted half an hour, the sepoys were eventually turned out of their barracks. The disarmed sepoys broke up into small detached parties and tried to escape in different directions. Some twenty of them were captured, ten of whom were hanged. Meanwhile the main body of the Dacca rebels passed through Mymensingh and reached the district of Rangpur. The Superintendent of Darjeeling reported early in January 1858 that "the Dacca mutineers were reported to have passed out of Darjeeling into the Nepal Terai." A few of them were captured but the bulk managed to escape.⁴

Evidently therefore Eastern India witnessed considerable commotion throughout 1857. Pioneering studies of the history of Eastern India however have indicated that the region was involved in discontent leading to the uprising as well as in the Revolt of 1857. We can get valuable information for the background of the Revolt of 1857 from the book of Lakshmi Subramanian.⁵ None of the major cantonments in Bengal was immune from the spirit of rebellion. In few cases the rebels enjoyed the covert support of the civil population. The linkages established by them with Manipuri princes, Chera chiefs, the Bhutias, to name a few, are indicative of a wider network, the ramifications of which need to be carefully explored. Thus it would be wrong to say that in 1857 eastern India constituted a stagnant backwater while the Gangetic heartland was in turmoil.

4 *Ibid*

5 Lakshmi Subramanian, *History of India, 1707-1857*, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Limited, 2010.