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**Subalterns and Raj**

South Asia since 1600

**Crispin Bates**

## 4 Peasant resistance, rebellion and the uprising of 1857

Asked if the people of Oudh [Awadh] were desirous of being placed under British rule, the Jemmadar replied: 'Miserable as we are, of all miseries keep us from that . . . the name of Oude and the honour of our nation would be at an end.'

(Indian Cavalry Officer, 1825)<sup>1</sup>

Bas ki fa'ale mayrid hai aaj, Har silah-shur Englistan ka	Today every British soldier Thinks himself an absolute potentate
Ghar se bazaar ko nikalate hue, Zahara hota hai aab insan ka	Between the house and the bazaar Terror reigns over the people
Chowk jisko kahain wo maqal hai, Ghar bana hai namunan zindan ka	The City square is an execution ground Home is a ghost of itself
Shahar-e Dilli ka zarra-zarra-e khak, Tashna-e khun hai har Musalaman ka	Delhi's very dust seems to cry out For the blood of the Muslims

(Ghalib, 1857)<sup>2</sup>

On land in India as in other parts of the empire, the British had to face continual uprisings of one sort or another, and these were especially commonplace in India in the early nineteenth century. The so-called Pax Britannica in India was thus very much a myth; indeed it was a myth in all parts of the empire and probably only applicable at sea where British naval power was pre-eminent. It is for this reason that one historian has described the events of 1857 as 'unique only in their scale' (Bayly 1988). The uprising of that year began with a mutiny amongst Indian sepoy's in regiments of the East India Company's Bengal army based in the plains of north India. It was made worse by the incompetence of those in command, and the fact that no wholly British-recruited regiments were available in north India to restore order. They had been despatched to fight on the north-west frontier in support of the Afghamis against the Persians in their struggle for control of the principality of Herat, under the threat of Russian intervention. The uprising spread outwards from Meerut to become a widespread civil and

urban insurrection, affecting all of the towns, villages and cities of north India. The rule of the East India Company was only restored after a bloody nine-month campaign, spearheaded by Sikh troops recruited from the Punjab and reinforcements sent up the Ganges from Calcutta. Unravelling exactly what happened, and why, has been complicated by partisan accounts on both sides. Contemporary and later British historians have sought to minimise the Company's responsibility, whilst Indian historians have tended to depict the events of that year as in some sense an anticipation of the Indian nationalist movement that later on was successfully to challenge colonial rule in the early twentieth century. In both versions of events, the exceptionality of 1857 and its leaders is emphasised, and the struggles of ordinary Indians before, during and after that year have been neglected.

### Indian resistance movements in the early nineteenth century

After the final defeat of the Marathas in 1818, the authority of the East India Company in the newly ceded and conquered territories in central and northern India was challenged on many fronts. *Dacoity*, or banditry was endemic, of which the so-called thugs were the most notorious example. The word 'thug' is of Indian origin, *thag* meaning 'to deceive'. Although terms like it could be found in generic use in previous periods, 'thug' was first used as a specific category by a British district officer named William Sleeman, in application to a variety of groups of marauding bandits in central India in the 1820s. The suppression of the thugs thereafter became part of the great civilising mission of the British in India, along with the abolition of *sati*, infanticide, human sacrifice, and other supposed social evils. Work on these fronts was faithfully reported to the Board of Control in London and the annual *Statement Exhibiting on Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India* from 1859 onwards. Sleeman described 'thuggee' as a religiously inspired criminal conspiracy, the bandits supposedly driven to sacrifice the blood of humans to propitiate the Hindu goddess Kali. They also robbed their victims. Kali was a popular Hindu goddess in eastern India in particular, although shrines dedicated to her can be found in other parts of India, including the city of Nagpur in western central India. If Kali really was enjoying 'thugs' to sacrifice humans to satisfy her blood lust, then a large proportion of the population of eastern India should have been thugs, for Kali was no rarity but simply one of the many incarnations of the god Shiva, worshipped by a great many Hindus.

The thuggee problem was initially 'discovered' in the Narmada valley in central India in the 1820s, in the territories seized by the East India Company from the *rajas* of Nagpur, Bhopal and Indore in 1818. It was alleged to extend into neighbouring Bundelkhand and beyond. The fact that the so-called thugs made a point of targeting off-duty Company sepoy's, and shared their booty with local Maratha and Muslim *zamindars* in the Vindhyan hills bordering the Narmada valley, suggests that this was not simply lawlessness but an extension of Maratha-style guerrilla warfare, as practised against the Mughals (Gordon 1969, 1993). It may even have been connected indirectly with the lucrative underground

trade in opium produced in the Maratha states of Scindia and Holkar in Malwa and exported to China via Bombay, which the East India Company had long endeavoured to suppress in favour of its own trade and opium sources in Bengal (Farooqui 1998). It was therefore as much a strategic as a criminal threat to the Company's interests. Soon William Sleeman was describing the thugs as not simply a local problem but as an India-wide secret sect, with its own covert signs, language (Ramasi) and rituals (Sleeman 1836):

While I was in civil charge of the district of Nursingpore, in the valley of the Nerbudda, in the years 1822, 1823, and 1824, no ordinary robbery or theft could be committed without my becoming acquainted with it . . . ; and if any man had then told me that a gang of assassins by profession resided in the village of Kundele, not four hundred yards from my court, and that the extensive groves of the village of Mundesur, only one stage from me on the road to Saugor and Bhopal, was one of the greatest bhils, or places of murder, in all India; that large gangs from Hindostan and the Dukhun used to rendezvous in these groves . . . and carry on their dreadful trade all along the lines of road that pass by and branch off from them, with the knowledge and connivance of the two landholders by whose ancestors these groves had been planted, I should have thought him a fool or a madman, and yet nothing could have been more true; the bodies of a hundred travellers lie buried in and among the groves of Mundesur, and a gang of assassins lived in and about the village of Kundele, while I was magistrate of the district, and extended their depredations to the cities of Poona and Hyderabad.<sup>3</sup>

Other local officers were sceptical, but after the subject was taken up by the British press, Sleeman was appointed special agent by the governor-general, heading a 'Thuggee & Dacoity Department' whose brief was to suppress the conspiracy. The word 'thug' entered into the English language, and spawned in Britain an entire genre of superstitious, orientalist, but highly popular adventure writing, such as Meadows Taylor's novel *Congressions of a Thug* (1839), which continues in fashion to the present day (van Woertkens 2002). The importance of this tale of successful local ambition, however, is the very slender evidential base upon which the whole enterprise was launched. Only by granting immunity from prosecution to so-called 'approvers', who accused others to save themselves from a sentence of death, and whose word was deemed by a special Act sufficient in itself to prosecute, was Sleeman able to gather any evidence from witnesses to present to the special jury-less courts set up to handle these cases. Even then the same few 'approvers' had often to be used over and over again. Between 1831 and 1837 no fewer than 3,266 'thugs' were captured, of whom 412 were hanged, 483 gave evidence for the state, and the remainder were transported or imprisoned for life (Figure 3). This apparently solved the problem, as little more was heard of thuggee after Sleeman's transfer to the post of resident at Gwalior in 1843. Nonetheless, the existence of a community of 'thugs' remained an acknowledged fact in the colonial cataloguing of the castes and tribes of central India in 1916

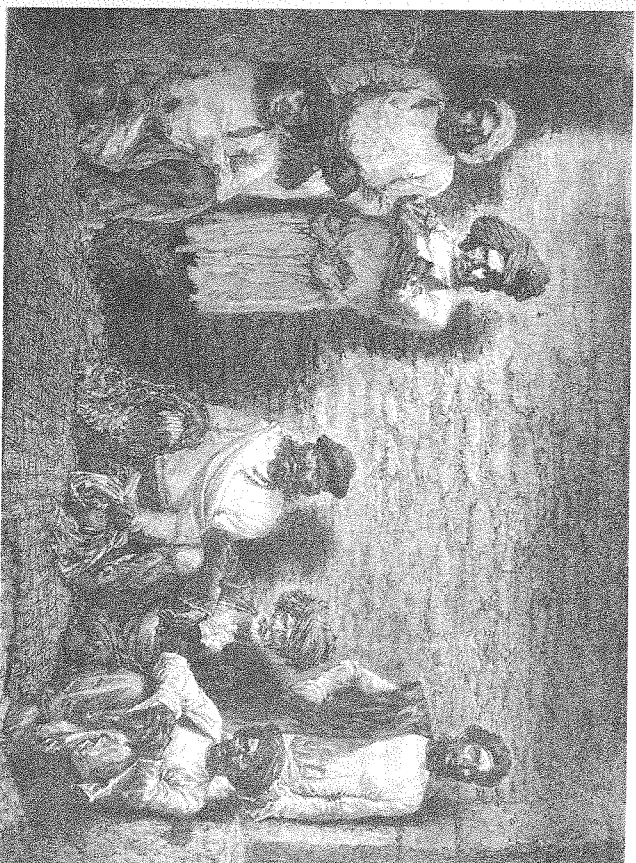


Figure 3 Thugs in Aurangabad jail, 1869 (by A. de Neuville from a photograph by M. Grandier). © M.D. Carter.

(the only source being Sleeman's accounts, which were paraphrased at length), and the 'Thuggee & Dacoity Department' (later to become India's Criminal Investigation Department) continued to pursue bandits of one sort or another until the end of the century.<sup>4</sup>

Lack of information was a common problem for the Indian police force, although opinions differ as to how far the Company succeeded in overcoming it (Bayly 1997). Commencing in the late eighteenth century, the appointment of the local village *daroga*, or constable, and watchmen, was nominally at least taken out of the hands of the *zamindars* or the village community, and brought under the control of the East India Company's district magistrates or collectors (often the same person). A district superintendent and a provincial chief superintendent were appointed so that the police force was transformed, as in Ireland (from where the model was borrowed), into effectively an army of occupation (Chatterji 1981; Arnold 1986). The police enjoyed little co-operation from the local population and were often the last to know if there was trouble brewing and who or what might be responsible for it. The problem of 'thuggee', identified, for what it was worth, by William Sleeman, was thus probably only the tip of an iceberg of banditry, crime and other forms of resistance to the Company's authority.

The thug phenomenon was paralleled by another and more serious law and order problem in the early nineteenth century, which was similar in causation: the *bindaris*. They were bandits who raided whole villages on horseback, principally

in the newly ceded territories in central and northern India (Anon. 1818; Ghosh 1966). The *pindaris* were mostly unemployed mercenary cavalrymen who had served in the armies of the Maratha princes and others, before being disbanded in 1818. The threat that they posed was so considerable that an entire sepoy army had to be sent to suppress them.

The thugs and the *pindaris* occupied a great deal of British military manpower, but there were numerous other uprisings in the same period to occupy them, many in *adivasi* or tribal areas. For example, in the 1820s a succession of revolts occurred amongst the Bhil tribes in Gujarat, and amongst the Kol in Bihar between 1829 and 1833. Most serious of all was a revolt by the Santhals in 1855, just two years before the uprising of 1857, following which more than 10,000 tribals were killed in British reprisals in an attempt to pacify the territory (Guha 1983a). Nomadic and 'wandering' communities had good cause to resent the British, by whom they had been systematically persecuted. Thus when Tatyva Tope fled south with his army from Kanpur towards the end of 1857 it was not surprising that Gond tribals in central India rose up in support of the rebels. In the early nineteenth century huge areas of grazing lands around Delhi, used by the Gujars, Rangars and Bhatits were cleared and given by the British to Jat peasant farmers to cultivate. These communities were therefore amongst the first to resort to arson and banditry as soon as British control collapsed in 1857. They all had one thing in common, being in one way or another losers in the land revenue settlements of the early nineteenth century. The Gujars and Bhatits lost land because the British did not recognise pastoralists to have proprietary right of access or occupancy. Tribals, who practised shifting forms of cultivation, were also frequently denied rights to the land and expelled from large areas of forest taken over by the government. It can be conjectured that many so-called thugs may have been Gond *adivasis* from the highlands of central India who had been forced out of the forests in which they had traditionally hunted and foraged. From a life of banditry and petty thieving, it was but a small step to join in open rebellion.

Jat and Rajput peasants, being settled cultivators, were more often beneficiaries of the land revenue settlements in the north of India, but they were by no means cohesive communities and some did not benefit at all. Those groups who became involved in insurrection in 1857 did so often as a means of reclaiming land that they thought had been unjustly apportioned to another group through the East India Company's land settlements (Stokes 1978). Others sought to redress minor grievances over taxation, water rates or the loss of smaller plots of land.

Uprisings of more substantial rural elites, as well as of peasants, occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Bundela Rajputs, for example, were relatively prosperous landowners in central India who rebelled in 1842 in reaction to tax increases and oppressive court proceedings that had deprived some of them of land. The mere arrival of a British land survey team, whose task was to measure the fields and decide how much tax should be paid, could provoke a riot, as occurred in Khandesh in 1852. There were also violent outbreaks among the peasantry on the Malabar coast, where Muslim Mappila tenants were almost continuously in revolt against Hindu landlords appointed by the British.

Finally, in urban areas, unrest was often communal, characterised by the rioting of unemployed Muslim artisans against the Hindu moneylenders who were prospering under colonial rule. The replacement of the law officers of the old Mughal cities (such as the *kotwal*, *gazi*, and *mughfi*) by brusque colonial officials added further to the prevailing sense of unease. Dissent and unrest were therefore widespread during the early part of the nineteenth century, but the inadequate intelligence of the East India Company meant that the seriousness of this opposition was not appreciated until events overtook them. When the general insurrection occurred in 1857, the company was therefore taken completely by surprise. The sudden collapse of British power merely provided the opportunity for many of these dissenting groups to rise up at the same time. This was what was unique about 1857.

### **The general causes of insurrection in 1857**

In order to ensure the renewal of its charter, the East India Company worked hard to create the impression that the early nineteenth century was a period of slow but progressive improvement for India, but the truth was far removed from this. It was in reality a time of radical experimentation and desperate contingency in the development of a British system of government, which created widespread resentment. Apart from the administrative reforms described in the previous chapters, a host of other petty interventions by the Company's officials, such as the rounding up and incarceration of prostitutes whenever there was an outbreak of venereal disease among the troops, had promoted disaffection (Ballhatchet 1957, 1980). One of the most widespread grievances concerned the increase in land tax, imposed in all of the newly ceded and conquered territories. This might have been bearable at a time of agricultural prosperity, but the early nineteenth century was a period of profound economic depression. British methods of collecting these taxes were also unpopular, involving as they did the introduction of a European system of courts whereby defaulters were arraigned before a magistrate and summarily deprived of their lands for failing to meet revenue payments. Such measures were novel, confusing, and illegitimate in the eyes of many Indians. The courts also greatly increased the powers of the *sahukar* or *bania* moneylenders to whom many were indebted – a further cause of resentment (Hardiman 1996). Most large land controllers, and many smaller ones at this time, had acquired their positions because they were aristocrats or *ulama* (Muslim scholars), the educated elite who ruled the Mughal empire, and had been appointed by the emperor or one of his governors or *deshmukhs*. But in the territories under Company rule, their authority was superseded by lawcourts, presided over by men in black frock-coats and trousers: the British, who did not sit in judgement by right of descent, as aristocrats, or as *kazis* or *panchis*. They occupied posts in court because they had completed an examination in London and had been appointed to the East India Company's Indian civil service. To many Indians this was a strange way to govern a country. Above all, the decisions of the courts were resented because they were final. Tax collection had always been a matter for negotiation under the Mughals:

those who could not pay might be threatened, but ultimately a compromise was often possible. Indian governors and *zamindars* also often made generous gifts of land, so-called *inam* lands, for the maintenance of temples and pilgrimage centres and as pensions to former public servants. But, imbued with Utilitarian ideals, and particularly David Ricardo's theories concerning agricultural rent, the Company's officials were taught that a rental charge imposed on the land, no matter how high, was not likely to undermine agricultural production and that the government's land tax was a form of rent. They did not see the surplus on agricultural production either as a form of subsistence or a reward for enterprise; they saw it as an unearned surplus, of which they could take as much as they pleased (Stokes 1959), whilst the grants of *inam* land were regarded as a drain on the state's resources to be curtailed. For this reason, the British were extremely inflexible in their revenue assessments, and were inclined to suspend privileged land-holdings granted by former rulers (Stokes 1978: ch. 2). Their demands for money to recoup the costs of previous decades of war also meant that taxes were often demanded from the rural population for the first time in cash rather than in kind, imposing an additional burden. Taxes were then collected not simply by force but by means of a detailed investigation and close supervision of the resources of the peasant economy, punitive sanctions being imposed for non-payment. Apart from the resulting loss of land, British legal procedures were resented, since they involved being publicly investigated and pilloried by officials in open court. It was an affront to the traditional hierarchy in rural areas, a hierarchy seen by Indians as political and social rather than economic. The British, however, saw agrarian relations in contractual terms. *Zamindars* were expected to pay their dues to the government, and if they did not they lost their position. Furthermore, the success of British district collectors, and their promotion, depended on close accounting and their ability to raise yields. This was an entirely different logic from that of the traditional structure of landholding in India, which was bound up with aristocratic right, and religious and social status (Cohn 1983).

The uprising of 1857 has been characterised as anti-colonial because the changes from which people were suffering in general were those effected by the colonial ruler – the East India Company. The problem was that there were many other causes for rebellion, and not all of those who took up arms were directly fighting against the colonial regime. Many rebels were hoping to restore a pre-colonial social order. They did not know who or what was responsible for the changes going on around them, but what they did want was to revive some form of traditional authority. With the collapse of British military power in north India in that year, others had no alternative but to turn to traditional leaders of one sort or another. Unfortunately, anyone who took to arms, even with the aim of self-defence or to restore some sort of local order, was often regarded as a rebel by the British and ultimately pilloried, tried and executed (Brodkin 1972).

The Indian army mutineers themselves, who signalled the commencement of the wider insurrection, had mixed motives. Some wanted to revive the authority of the ailing Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, and the units of the British army that mutinied at Meerut in May 1857 determined their fate at an early stage by

deciding to march on Delhi to reinstall the emperor rather than march, as they might alternatively have done, towards the British seat of power in Calcutta. In doing so, they immediately alienated the large number of Indians who had never recognised the authority of the Mughals, or who, like the Sikhs in the Punjab, had spent many generations struggling against the Mughal empire. They also alienated Hindu rulers who were prospering under the East India Company's rule. Naturally, they did win the support of Mughal aristocrats in the north of India. A further advantage of marching to Delhi was that it gave the rebels a concrete aim, which was greatly needed for the obvious reason that India, at this time, lacked a truly powerful nationalist ethos. Those who took up arms were often fighting for their country against the British, but that country might be Gwalior, Bengal, Awadh, Indore, etc. – it was not in the name of India itself. They were fighting, very often, for the reinstatement of kingdoms, patrimonies, and chiefdoms that had existed in the pre-British period, or for the revival of an empire that covered part of the subcontinent. They were by no means united in struggling for a single political alternative, and this is one of the reasons why the uprising of 1857 was ultimately successfully suppressed by the British. There was no overall strategy; though to say this is something of a truism, since it is absurd to suggest that there could easily have been one.

### Unravelling the events of the uprising in 1857

Most of the accounts of 1857 that have survived are unreliable as historical sources. To begin with, it is always the victor's version of events that tends to take precedence, and since the British ultimately overwhelmed the insurrectionists it is the British view that has generally held sway. The uprising was a clear sign that the East India Company had seriously misruled the Indo-Gangetic plain, but they were reluctant to admit this, which is why in many subsequent British accounts 1857 is usually referred to as the 'mutiny'. By this it is implied that the insurrection was simply an act of treason by a group of soldiers that was dealt with appropriately. British descriptions of the 'mutiny' were also typically accompanied by accounts of various barbarities and horrors committed by the Indians as if to justify the violent means by which the restoration of colonial rule was accomplished. But this is not, of course, how Indians regarded the matter; then or now. Neither was the insurrection of that year confined to the ranks of the military; nor were the atrocities committed as one-sided as the British implied.

Reacting against British misrepresentations, many Indian authors, most famously the radical nationalist V.D. Savarkar writing in 1908,<sup>5</sup> have described the events of 1857 as 'the first national war of Indian Independence'. However, this is clearly a misnomer since, as one historian, R.C. Majumdar (1963), has commented, 'on the whole, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the so-called First National War of Independence of 1857 is neither first, nor national, nor a war of independence'. More detailed assessments published following the centenary commemoration of 1857 have tended to focus less on the activities of the Bengal sepoys and more on the associated uprisings of the civil population in urban and

rural areas. Historians such as S.B. Chaudhuri (1955) have thereby furthered the myth that the mutiny of the Bengal army and the rebellion that affected much of northern India during that year was a proto-nationalist and exclusively anti-colonial movement aimed at expelling the British from India. Other authors, such as Eric Stokes (1978), have preferred to argue that the rebels of 1857 were fighting for not one, but a variety of causes and nationalisms.

There remains a problem with source materials, which exacerbates the difficulties of interpretation. The Urdu records of the Lucknow and Delhi courts are preserved in the Allahabad and National Archives, but they are written in *shikasta*, a very difficult form of Persian calligraphy. By contrast, there are extremely voluminous English-language historical records of 1857 that have survived, but they are largely derived from the subsequent attempts made by the British to pacify the country. They are thus part of a project to restore order, rather than a dispassionate, legal investigation into what occurred. Essays by E.I. Brodtkin (1972) and Ranajit Guha (1983b) have explained why it is so difficult to deduce what really happened from such sources. A great many of these are the accounts of soldiers who were engaged in pacification exercises, and the trial documents of those they believed, often mistakenly, to be responsible for the uprising. The authors and protagonists were keen to convince themselves that they were in control of the situation and that this was not a popular insurrection. They sought to identify and punish alleged agitators and ringleaders who had misled the supposedly naive masses into insurrection: a more realistic exercise than attempting to punish the population as a whole. The documents are thus filled with fabricated conspiracy theories, and attempts to pin the blame for what had happened on somebody – anybody in fact other than the colonial regime itself.

The 'creation' of a scapegoat often began with the identification of a popular local leader with an anti-British cause. In the district of Bijnor in Rohilkhand it was Mahmud Khan, the Pathan *nawab* of Najibabad, who had triumphed over long-standing rivals for power amongst the local Rajputs. Another Pathan, Khan Bahadur Khan, had joined the rebels and held sway over much of the rest of Rohilkhand. Since Nicholas Shakespeare, the British magistrate and collector, characterised the Rajputs as loyal (despite evidence to the contrary), the actions of Mahmud Khan, in defeating them and asserting his authority in Bijnor was subsequently defined as rebellious, despite his early statements of support for the British government. Upon hearing news of his condemnation, Mahmud Khan was ultimately forced into the arms of the rebels, but not until the closing months of the uprising, and only after he had saved the lives of several Europeans in his district. His fate was transportation for life, and he died within a few months of commencing his sentence. Local Rajput leader, Sheoraj Singh, by contrast, was rewarded for his loyalty to the British, despite the fact that he had corresponded with the rebels and had claimed to be a true supporter of the rebel leader Khan Bahadur Khan (Brodtkin 1972).

So blinkered were contemporaries as to the origins of the uprising, that some alleged it was a plot hatched by Muslims in collaboration with the czar of Russia, as part of an attempt by the Russians to destabilise and take over the

subcontinent. Others blamed Nana Sahib, the former *peshawar* or ruler of the Maratha empire, powerless and deprived even of his pension since 1851, alleging that he had organised the entire revolt, together with the *rani* of Jhansi and other disaffected ex-rulers. These theories are extremely improbable. Nana Sahib, for example, although resident near Kanpur at the time, was so much trusted by the British that when the regiments there turned against their officers he was asked to take charge of the Treasury to keep it safe. It was only later that he appears to have joined the rebel forces, probably at the urging of Tarya Tope and others among his retainers. He was vilified for his part in the arrangement of a cease-fire that ended in the massacre of civilians, but there is no evidence that he was responsible. He never had the chance to tell his side of this story: fleeing Kanpur after the final recapture of the city at the end of the year, he disappeared without trace, never stood trial, and was never called upon to explain his actions. The only source available on the events in Kanpur in 1857, from an Indian point of view, is a recent attempt to reconstruct the Kanpur insurrectionists' motives, which, although valuable, remains essentially speculative (Mukherjee 1990).

### **Grievances of the military**

The 19th Native Infantry, stationed at Barrackpore just west of Calcutta, was the first regiment to rebel against its officers, following the now notorious distribution of greased cartridges to be used with newly issued Lee Enfield rifles. These cartridges were greased with fat alleged to be that of cows (revered by Hindus) or of pigs (which was defiling for Muslims), and were believed to be part of an attempt to forcibly convert the sepoys to Christianity. Those involved in the rebellion were arrested and a court of inquiry recommended that the regiment be disbanded. On the day following the initial rebellion – 29 March 1857 – Mangal Pande of the 34th Regiment, which had been barracked alongside the 19th, fired at his commanding officer Sir John Hearsey but was overpowered. He and another sepoy, Ishwari Pande, were tried and executed. The name 'Pande' was thereafter immortalised as the nickname given by the British to the rebel sepoys.<sup>6</sup> After the 34th was also disbanded, rumours about the greased cartridges rapidly spread. Six weeks later, a thousand miles away, a native regiment at Meerut was publicly humiliated for refusing to use the cartridges by being marched in shackles to the jail. The next evening, on Sunday, 10 May, the duty officer at Meerut was shot, and the sepoys rallied around the guns of the regiment, forced open the armoury to seize supplies of the supposed polluting cartridges, and attacked and killed their British officers. The next day they marched to Delhi behind their regimental flag.

Given the unanticipated nature of the military mutiny, and keen to avert blame from themselves, officials made much of the sepoys' objections to the distribution of cartridges for use with the Lee Enfield rifle. However, although the cartridges may have provided a rallying point for a few of the mutineers, it was only one of the issues that concerned them. And interestingly, once they had rebelled, the mutinous regiments showed no compunction at all about using these same rifles and cartridges against the British. The cartridge issue nonetheless underscored

the weakness of the military's control over the lower ranks of the Bengal army, highlighting the very small number of British officers, and their poor relationship with the troops. Above all, it symbolised the widespread resentment and distrust of the East India Company's policies. This mistrust revolved, among other things, around a perceived threat to Indian religion. Missionary activities had been permitted in India since 1813, lending credence to the fear that the principal reason why the British were in India was in order to Christianise the population. Such fears had exhibited themselves on previous occasions, as in 1806 when a sepoy regiment at Vellore in the Madras presidency had mutinied after the issue of a new form of leather headgear, also considered polluting.<sup>7</sup> There were other fears of course, but British historiographies have tended to stress the cartridge issue because it could be used to demonstrate the irrationality and fanaticism of the natives and the unreasonableness of their conduct. That they should take up arms over an issue as trivial and superstitious as the greasing of a cartridge, neatly diverted attention from other aspects of the Company's maladministration that provided more contingent and pressing causes for rebellion.

The other concerns of the military were more specific (Stokes 1986). Indian troops were at that time organised into armies based in the three presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal. If these armies fought beyond their frontiers they received an additional allowance. In 1856 the governor-general decided that since the British controlled two-thirds of the subcontinent, these additional allowances were no longer legitimate, and they were removed. The troops of the Bengal army based in Awadh at this time thus immediately received a cut in pay. The General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 also committed the sepoys to sign a declaration that they would be willing to fight overseas if necessary in the service of the East India Company; and this was resented by the majority who had no desire to travel so far. A voyage overseas, it was feared by some, might also entail a loss of caste status because of the inevitable contact with polluting *fenigi* or foreigners (although the evidence of migration in other circumstances suggests it could only have been a minority belief). Another cause of resentment was the British policy of garnering recruits from a wide cross-section of the population. Until 1856 a large proportion of soldiers in the Bengal army were Brahmins and Rajputs from the north-west of Bengal. Villagers in this region were becoming accustomed to the income derived from sending recruits to the army. The kingdom of Awadh, independent but allied to the British by treaty since the late eighteenth century, had also become an important source of recruits to the army. The Company offended these groups by stating their intention to recruit more widely across the subcontinent. The sense of grievance had therefore spread to the main army-recruiting villages, and a further discordant note was added to this when the disbanded Meerut mutineers returned home.

The decision by the British to seize control of the kingdom of Awadh had also fostered resentment. Awadh had been a loyal ally of the British. Under the notorious policy of lapse, announced in 1850 by Viceroy Dalhousie, the British stated their intention to seize control of any princely state in which there might be a disputed succession. This they did, rapidly taking over the Nagpur kingdom in

1854 (the largest of all), along with Jhansi, Satara, Udaipur, Balaghat, Sambalpur, Jaipur, Carnatic and Tanjore. They justified their actions by claiming that 'Indian despotism' was thereby ended, frontiers were consolidated, that it was administratively convenient, and that it was expressly desired by the people themselves (Fisher 1993). In the case of Awadh, they did not trouble to wait for a disputed succession. The British resident (the Company's representative at court) alleged that the *rajā* was misruling his country, and this alone was used as a pretext to seize control of the kingdom in 1856 (Fisher 1987; Mukherjee 1984).

Arguably, therefore, it was not the peasants and sepoys who were the rebels in 1857 but the British themselves. In the view of many Muslim political commentators, since the British were merely the revenue collectors of Bengal, they were vastly exceeding their authority, and since the *nawāb* of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, was the *vizier*, or guardian, of the Mughal empire, the seizure of his kingdom was an attack on Mughal sovereignty itself. Following annexation, the *nawāb* was taken to Calcutta along with members of his family, and the British then made matters worse by sending in a high-handed settlement officer, Martin Gubbins, who in the process of fixing the revenue demand dispossessed a great many local aristocrats, known as *talukdars*, from their ancestral estates. These *talukdars*, led by the *rajā* of Mahmudabad, were among the first aristocratic leaders to raise arms against the British and were strongly supported by their rural populations.

Other factors played a part in the uprising of 1857. The Sikh regiments of Ranjit Singh, who had been defeated in 1840, had been incorporated into the British army. There were some 15,000 of these troops and they were the first and largest force available to the British to move into the northern plains and retake the areas that had risen in revolt. One of the major failings of the British prior to 1857 was that when they had taken over the kingdom of Awadh they did not recruit the army of the king in a similar manner. They disbanded all 50,000 of the king's troops, effectively dispersing large numbers of aggrieved trained soldiers over the entire region. Once similarly large numbers of men serving in the Bengal army had been alienated the basis was laid for what became a widespread civil as well as military insurrection.

### The course of the insurrection

By its nature, the East India Company's rule was a military occupation. The company was staffed by military men holding military titles. Military bases, or cantonments, were positioned so as to overawe the principal towns and cities, and sepoy units were based in all of the princely states, as well as in the coastal trading zones. Because the Company's rule was a military regime, the state itself was imperilled as soon as the military mutinied. As Karl Marx had commented: 'it is evident that the allegiance of the Indian people rests on the fidelity of the native army, in creating which the British rule simultaneously organised the first general centre of resistance . . . (to colonial rule).'<sup>8</sup>

The events at Meerut demonstrated that the cartridge issue, emotive as it may have been, was still merely an excuse for revolt. Many have argued that it had

indeed been planned for some time, citing evidence that for months before, lotus flowers and *chapatis* (flat breads) were mysteriously circulating around the villages of north India, it being rumoured that the planned date for insurrection was 31 May. However, Ranajit Guha has put a slightly different twist on these events, arguing that rather than an organised conspiracy this was merely evidence of widespread rural unrest. He traces the exchange of *chapatis* to the traditional technique of disease prevention through transference, a practice in northern India described in detail by William Crooke, which involved 'the symbolic use of a ritually consecrated object or animal to act as the carrier of an epidemic which had broken out in a locality or was about to do so, and push it beyond its boundaries'. Amongst the transmitters that could be used for the transfer of cholera were 'images of the cholera goddess, doles of rice collected from the local residents, filth and sweepings picked up from the affected villages, domestic animals such as goats, buffaloes and fowl, or in the case of an exceptionally cruel custom reported from Punjab, Chamars "branded on the buttocks and turned out of the village"'. The circulating *chapati* was thus a transference sign of this type that acquired new meaning, becoming the predictive sign or omen of an imminent upheaval (Guha 1983: 243–245). Whatever the circumstances, it must have been very obvious to the earliest mutineers that Meerut had to be involved as it was one of the strongest cantonments in the north, but by imprisoning soldiers on 10 May, the British seem to have forced the hands of those involved at Meerut into an early commencement of the revolt. According to eyewitnesses, the Meerut regiments were clearly expected when they arrived at the gates of Delhi, as they were greeted with lotus flowers and *chapatis* and urged to clear Delhi of the British – which they did, slaughtering not only British soldiers and officers but all Christians converts wherever they could be found. Immediately afterwards they sought an audience with the emperor and king of Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, whom they urged to lead them. To this the frail emperor (he was 82 years of age) reluctantly and hesitatingly agreed.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, numerous sepoy regiments steadily flowed into the capital (the ultimate destination of some 100,000 out of the 139,000 who mutined), and proclamations were circulated calling for Muslim and Hindu to unite in a struggle for *din* (Islamic faith) and *dharma* (Hindu duty), a central characteristic of the revolt (Ray 2003; Dalrymple 2006). Many of these proclamations were written by Mirza Mughal (Zafar's fifth son), who endeavoured to take charge and unite the chaotic rebel force in Delhi. Others were written by outlying *mansabdars* and supporters of the revolt who endeavoured to rally supplies and troops by invoking the authority and name of the emperor. The following document (known as the Azamgarh proclamation), calling for support and listing the grievances of the rebels, is interesting to read, not least for its clarity of purpose:

It is well known to all, that in this age the people of Hindustan, both Hindoos and Mahommedans, are being ruined under the tyranny and oppression of the infidel and treacherous English . . .

Section I – Regarding Zemindars. – It is evident the British government, in

making zemindary settlements, have imposed exorbitant jimmas, and have disgraced and ruined several zemindars, by putting up their estates to public auction for arrears of rent, inasmuch, that on the institution of a suit by a common *zool* yet, a maidservant, or a slave, the respectable zemindars are summoned into court arrested, put in jail, and disgraced . . . in the Badshahi government . . . every zamindar will have absolute rule in his own zemindary. The zemindary disputes will be summarily decided according to the Shurrah and the Shasters, without any expense; and zemindars who will assist in the present war with their men and money, shall be excused for ever from paying half the revenue . . .

Section II. – Regarding Merchants. – It is plain that the infidel and treacherous British government have monopolised the trade of all the fine and valuable merchandise, such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade of trifles to the people . . . When the Badshahi government is established . . . the trade of every article, without exception both by land and water, shall be open to the native merchants of India, who will have the benefit of the government steam-vessels and steam carriages for the conveyance of their merchandise gratis; and merchants having no capital of their own shall be assisted from the public treasury. It is therefore the duty of every merchant to take part in the war, and aid the Badshahi government with his men and money . . .

Section III. – Regarding Public Servants. – It is not a secret thing, that under the British government, natives employed in the civil and military services, have little respect, low pay, and no manner of influence and all the posts of dignity and emolument in both the departments, are exclusively bestowed upon Englishmen; . . . Natives, whether Hindoos or Mohammedans, who fall fighting against the English, are sure to go to heaven; and those killed fighting for the English, will, doubtless, go to hell, therefore, all the natives in the British service ought to be alive to their religion and interest, and, abjuring their loyalty to the English, side with the Badshahi government and obtain salaries of 200 or 300 rupees per month for the present, and be entitled to high posts in future . . .

All the sepoys and sowars [*sawars*] who have for the sake of their religion, joined in the destruction of the English, and are at present, on any consideration in a state of concealment, either at home or elsewhere, should present themselves to me without the least delay or hesitation. . . . Foot soldiers will be paid at the rate of three annas, and sowars [*sawars*] at eight or twelve annas per diem for the present, and afterwards they will be paid double of what they get in the British service . . .

Section IV. – Regarding Artisans. – It is evident that the Europeans, by the introduction of English articles into India, have thrown the weavers, the cotton-dressers, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the shoemakers, &c., out of employ, and have engrossed their occupations, so that every description of native artisan has been reduced to beggary. But under the Badshahi government the native artisan will exclusively be employed in the services of the

kings, the rajahs, and the rich; and this will no doubt insure their prosperity. Therefore the artisans ought to renounce the English services, and assist the Majahdeens . . . (religious freedom fighters) engage in the war, and thus be entitled both to secular and eternal happiness.

Section V – Regarding Pundits, Fakirs, and other learned persons. – The pundits and fakirs being the guardians of the Hindoo and Mohammedan religions respectively, and the European being the enemies of both the religions . . . the pundits and fakirs are bound to present themselves to me, and take their share in the holy war, otherwise they will stand condemned according to the tenor of the Shurrah and the Shasters; but if they come, they will, when the Badshahi government is well established, receive rent-free lands.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst the mutinous sepoys and a growing number of self-proclaimed volunteer *jihadis* who joined them consolidated their hold on Delhi, preparations went ahead for revolt in Awadh. In the capital Lucknow, the commanding British officer, Sir Henry Lawrence, was warned that a shot would be the signal for the commencement of insurrection on 30 May. The story has it that whilst dining that evening he commented on the inactivity of the supposed mutineers, saying 'your friends are not punctual!', at which point a shot rang out. The next day, 34 miles west of Agra, Indian troops at Bharatpur in eastern Rajasthan revolted, and at Shahjahanpur, in north-central North-Western Provinces the British were attacked whilst attending morning service. At this point the insurrection might still have been contained, but responsibility for its escalation must lie partly in the hands of General James George Neill, commanding the 1st Madras Fusiliers. Upon hearing of the events in Awadh, Neill marched to Varanasi, on what he thought was a pre-emptive mission. As soon as he arrived, he disbanded the local native regiment, lined up the sepoys, and shot them. Upon seeing this, a regiment of Sikhs stationed at Varanasi, normally considered 'loyal', revolted and were also shot. General Neill then embarked upon a general campaign of terrorism, hanging every able-bodied man he could lay his hands on who aroused the least suspicion. News of these atrocities caused two native regiments at Kanpur, hitherto loyal, to revolt, and march to Bithur, where they met up with Nana Sahib, the deposed Maratha *peshwa*, whom they persuaded to lead them to Delhi.

The British garrison at Kanpur was commanded by General Wheeler, who moved his men to the entrenchment surrounding the residency, from where they fired on the 53rd and 56th Native Infantry battalions who had not up until then mutined, thus immediately prompting them to do so. At this point Nana Sahib's forces turned back to Kanpur and laid siege to the entrenchment. General Neill was ordered by telegraph from Calcutta to move to Allahabad and Kanpur, but he delayed, claiming that he was too busy with operations to 'pacify' the country around Varanasi, which mostly involved burning villages. However, in terror at the prospect of his approach, the 6th Native Infantry at Allahabad mutined on 6 June, killing their officer and six cadets. Meanwhile, further north, troops under generals Wilson and Barnard attempted to relieve Delhi. Meeting up on 7 June, they managed to regain control of the ridge overlooking Delhi after fierce fighting.

They then clung on to this for the next three and a half months, despite some 22 attacks by rebel forces from Delhi and an outbreak of cholera.

On 8 June, native troops of the formerly independent princely state of Jhansi rebelled and attacked the Europeans in the fort. General Neill reached Allahabad on 11 June, but this was too late for General Wheeler and the residents at Kanpur who surrendered to the forces of Nana Sahib and Tanya Tope in exchange for an offer of safe passage to Calcutta. In the now infamous massacre, as they were embarking on boats on the Ganges on 27 June at Satichaura Ghat (Figure 4), they were set upon by sepoys and city residents, angered (according to Mukherjee [1990]) at news of General Neill's outrages and by rumours that the daughter of Nana Sahib had been captured and burnt alive by the British. When he heard what was happening, Nana Sahib gave orders that the women and children be spared. Seventy British officers in all survived, but they were imprisoned at a house called Bibighar, where they were massacred the next day. The bodies were thrown down a well, where a British memorial was subsequently erected. This was replaced after independence by a statue of Tanya Tope, widely regarded today as a great Indian hero.

At Lucknow, the British retreated to the residency. Foolishly, Sir Henry Lawrence then decided to attack the rebels amassing just outside the city at a small village called Chinhat. There they found themselves outmanoeuvred and outnumbered, and retreated in a panic, blowing up their ammunition dump at Machchi Bhawan on the way back into the residency. The siege of Lucknow continued for many months thereafter. The strength of support for the rebels was due to the

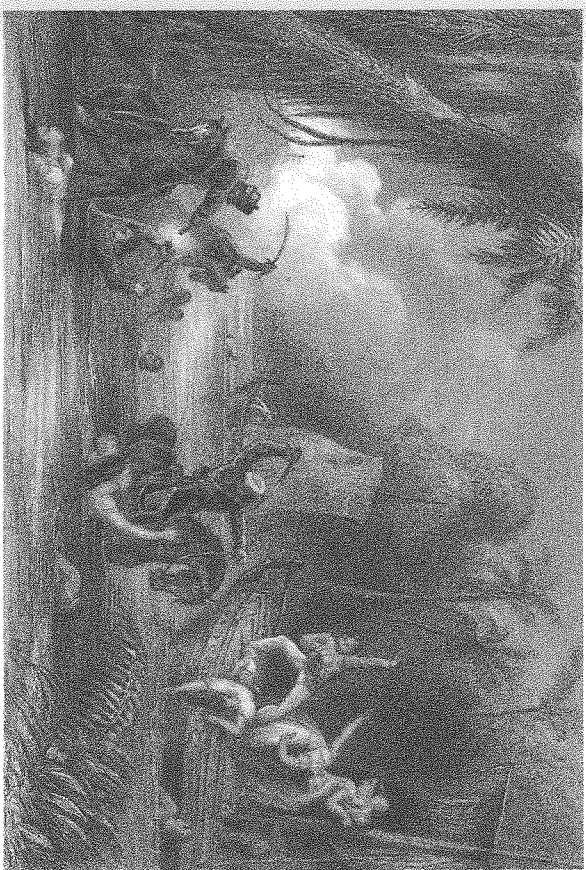


Figure 4 Massacre in the river at Kanpur (from C. Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, London 1858). © National Library of Scotland.

involvement of the mass of the population of Awadh at an early stage, as revealed in the following proclamation, seized by the British, and which reads like a fiery, populist rendition of the Azamgarh proclamation:

It has become the bounden duty of all the people, whether women or men, slave girls or slaves, to come forward and put the English to death. The adoption of the following measures will lead to their destruction, viz., all the Mohavees and the Pundits should explain in every village and city the misfortunes which the success of the English will entail on the people and the advantages and spiritual benefit which will accrue from their extirpation. The Kings, Waziers, Rajahs and Nawabs ought to slay them in the field of battle, the people should not leave their city in consequence of the entrance of the English therein, but on the contrary should shut up their doors and all the people, whether men, women or children . . . ought to put these accursed English to death by firing guns, carbines and pistols; from the terraces, shooting arrows and pelting them with stones, bricks . . . and all other things which may come into their hands. They should stone to death the English in the same manner, as the swallows stoned the Chief of the elephants. The sepoy, the nobles, the shopkeepers, the oil men etc. and all other people of the city, being of one accord, should make a simultaneous attack upon them, some of them should kill them by firing guns . . . and with swords, arrows, daggers . . . some lift them up on spears . . . some should wrestle and with stratagem break the enemy to pieces, some should strike them with cudgels, some slap them, some throw dust in their eyes, some should beat them with shoes . . . In short, no one should spare any efforts, to destroy the enemy and reduce them to the greatest extremities.<sup>11</sup>

The virulence of the language suggests the depth of anti-British feeling known to exist amongst the rural population. Such was the popularity of the revolt in Awadh that whilst the Europeans in the residency died at the rate of ten per day the rebel forces surrounding them grew in number to more than 10,000.<sup>12</sup>

General Neill delayed advancing from Allahabad, claiming he was too busy 'mopping up', which meant a continuation of his policy of indiscriminate hanging. Soon there was not a single able-bodied man to be found capable of assisting in the transport of military equipment. A force under General Havelock was sent up from Calcutta on 7 July to aid in the relief of Kanpur, arriving too late to be of assistance, although they were able to defeat Nana Sahib's forces in an engagement on 27 July. Soon after this Havelock's forces won a decisive victory at Bithur, forcing Nana Sahib to retreat to Gwalior.

At about this time Bakht Khan, a former gunner from Bareilly and a devout Muslim, arrived at Delhi with a large force and treasure and was made commander-in-chief of the rebel forces by the emperor (despite Bakht Khan's disdain for him), displacing Mirza Mughal who was made adjutant-general and therefore effective head of the administration. Bakht Khan did an effective job of rallying the rebel forces and attacking the British on the ridge. On 14 August, however,

John Nicholson finally arrived at Delhi with a large column of troops, consisting of north-west frontier tribesmen and Sikhs from the Punjab. Soon after this, perhaps sensing the danger, renewed proclamations were published in the emperor's name calling for supplies and support from the Delhi hinterland.

### The British regain control

On 14 September, Delhi was finally attacked by the reinforcements from the Punjab: the massive Kashmiri gate was partly blown up, and the British rushed in and recaptured the city. On 20 September the last of the Delhi strongholds was taken, and on the 21st William Hodson captured the emperor, who was hiding in Humayun's tomb and surrendered in exchange for the guarantee of his life (Figure 5). The emperor was taken back to the Red Fort, now under British control. The next day Hodson seized from the tomb Mirza Mughal, Khizr Sultan, and Abu Bakr, the three princes who had commanded the Mughal forces in Delhi. Accompanied by an escort of *sawars* (cavalry troopers), he took them out on the road to Delhi, then stopped, stripped the three princes naked and shot them dead at point-blank range with his revolver. For several weeks after its recapture, Delhi resounded to the sounds of gunfire as the British looted and wreaked revenge with a series of horrific executions of mutinous sepoys, hundreds of whom were shot or hanged each day on a gallows especially constructed in Chandni Chowk, or occasionally (in imitation of a Muslim style of execution) blown from the mouths of cannons. Thereafter, in a mirror image of the slaughter when the city was first

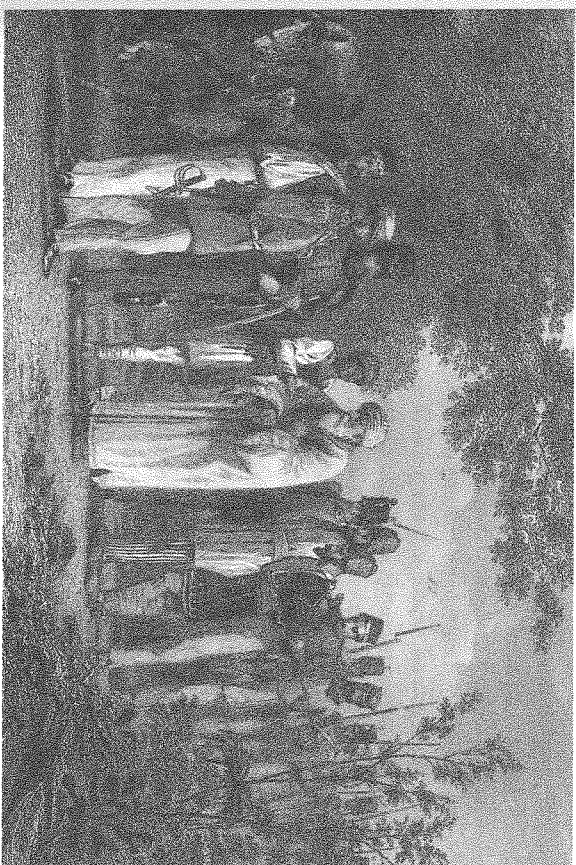


Figure 5 Surrender of Bahadur Shah to Captain Hodson (from C. Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, London 1858), © National Library of Scotland.

captured by the sepoys, able-bodied male civilians were dragged from their houses and killed upon the word of informers, who then shared in the loot of their property. The Urdu poet Ghalib, one of the few notables to survive the ordeal, described the scene in his inimitable fashion in a poem, the opening lines of which are reproduced at the beginning of this chapter. The destruction within the city, which reduced the buildings of the Red Fort alone to one-fifth of their former area, brought to a complete end not only a dynasty but the dominance of Muslim Urdu culture in north India.

On 25 September generals Outram and Havelock reached Lucknow; however, the mutineers had only strategically withdrawn and, soon after, these same British soldiers found themselves trapped within the city walls (described by Maria Geron [1958: ch. v]), forcing the commander-in-chief, Sir Colin Campbell, to set out from Calcutta to relieve them with troops sent from London. He arrived at Lucknow on 17 October, and on the night of the 23rd the besieged Britishers sneaked through the lines of the insurgents to safety. Five days later Nana Sahib's army, led by Tarya Tope, took revenge by engaging and defeating the army of Lieutenant-General Windham and retaking Kanpur. This victory was short-lived, however, as the army of Sir Colin Campbell took the city back again on 6 December, forcing Tarya Tope into retreat. On 21 March 1858, the forces of Colin Campbell finally recaptured Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, engaging in an orgy of looting and plunder, vividly described by *The Times* correspondent W.H. Russell:

It was one of the strangest and most distressing sights that could be seen; but it was also most exciting . . . Discipline may hold soldiers together till the fight is won; but it assuredly does not exist for a moment after an assault has been delivered, or a storm has taken place . . . Hitler and thither, with loud cries, dart European and native soldiery firing at the windows, from which come now and then dropping shots or hisses of a musket ball. At every door there is an eager crowd, smashing the panels with the stocks of their firelocks, or breaking the fastenings by discharges of their weapons . . . Here and there the invaders have forced their way into the long corridors, and you hear the musketry rattling inside; the crash of glass, the shouts and yells of the combatants, and little jets of smoke curl out of closed lattices. Lying amid the orange-groves are dead and dying sepoy; and the white statues are reddened with blood . . . From the broken portals issue soldiers laden with loot or plunder: shawls, rich tapestry, gold and silver brocade, caskets of jewels, arms and splendid dresses. The men are wild with fury and lust of gold – literally drunk with plunder. Some come out with China vases or mirrors, dash them to pieces on the ground and return to seek more valuable booty. Others are busy gouging out the precious stones from the stems of pipes, from saddle clothes, or the hilts of swords, or butts of pistols and firearms. Some swathe their bodies in stuffs crusted with precious metals and gems; others carry off lumber, brass pots, or vases of jade and China.

(Russell [1858] 1957: 100–101)

After the defeat at Kanpur, Nana Sahib allegedly fled to Nepal while Tarya Tope marched to Kalpi to aid the *rani*, Lakshmi of Jhansi, against the forces of General Walpole. Walpole was defeated, and Tarya continued south. However, on 23 April 1858 General Hugh Rose arrived, and engaged and captured the remainder of the *rani*'s forces at Kopati Serai. The *rani* led her forces into battle on horseback, was shot and wounded, then rode to Gwalior, where she died. Indefatigable, Tarya Tope marched on through central India, Rajasthan, and Gujarat in an attempt to raise the Marathas in revolt. Only a few Gond chiefs in the highlands of central India agreed to lend support, and he was finally betrayed (by his friend the chief of Narwar) and captured in the forest of Paron. Tope was executed in Shivpuri (formerly Sipri) in present-day Madhya Pradesh in April 1859.

Tarya Tope, whose real name was Ramchandra Pandurang, was one of the more strategically minded, ruthless and efficient of the rebel leaders. Originally just a Maratha gunner, he rose to be the commander-in-chief of the forces led by Nana Sahib. Others were less clear-sighted. The siege of the British residency in Lucknow was prioritised by the rebels because of its royal associations – as the former capital of the kingdom of Awadh – at the expense of advancing on Calcutta, crossing the River Ganges, and cutting one of the means of communication available to the British. This lapse enabled the British to marshal troops in the east and in the western part of India and to retake the northern plains.

### The extent of popular support

Although the uprising was confined to the northern part of India, other parts of the country had similar cause to resent British rule. Nonetheless, despite the fact that many Mughal aristocrats had been supplanted by Hindu traders, who had profited from their relationship with the British, the Company's rule had failed to penetrate much towards the village level in *zamindari* areas such as Bihar, where it could even be described as superficial (Yang 1988). There were rulers in other parts of India who had been dispossessed, and local populations with serious grievances. But the fact that the insurrection was confined largely to the Indo-Gangetic plain demonstrates that India was far from being a homogeneous polity at this time. Indians living in Hyderabad thought that yet another war between the Marathas and the British was in progress. Others had little idea of the scale of insurrection, believing it was merely a *zamindari* uprising of the sort that had occurred frequently under the Mughals. Although there are clearly the seeds here of later patriotic nationalism (Bayly 1998), the insurrection was arguably a purely regional affair.

Two areas – Bengal and the Punjab – remained at least superficially loyal despite their proximity to the rebellion's heartland of north India. There was a large British force based in Bengal, and another in the Punjab, which had been recently conquered; British troops were also massed on the borders of Afghanistan. There was thus no practical opportunity for dissent. This also highlights one reason why the collapse of British authority that did take place in 1857

was so sudden: when the Indian regiments rebelled, there was no substantial force of British soldiers under arms anywhere near the region in a position to restore order. It was not until the forces recalled from Afghanistan and the troops in the Punjab and Bengal were assembled, and then joined by reinforcements diverted en route to China, that the insurrectionists could finally be suppressed.

The desire for a restitution of the old system, and for the conjunction once again of civil and moral law, caused many insurrectionists to turn to traditional leaders to achieve this end. To this extent 1857 was a reactionary movement, intended and tending to revive former privileges. So it was that the revolt centred around aristocrats such as Khan Bahadur Khan, the last independent Muslim ruler of Rohilkhand before it was annexed by the British in 1801, whilst in Awadh, the revolt was led by ex-military leaders and focused around the capital, Lucknow. There it was led by Birjis Qadir (a young son of the *nawab* of Awadh who was acclaimed as king on 5 July 1857), Begum Hazrat Mahal the ex-queen mother of the kingdom (who refused to stay with the ex-*nawab* Wajid Ali Shah when the British exiled him to Calcutta the year before), and the *talukdars*.

Subaltern historians have very convincingly demonstrated, using available evidence, that there were many opportunists as well as established local leaders, and numerous individuals who took up arms on their own initiative without waiting for the emperor's appeal, or for feudal aristocrats to tell them what to do. Gautam Bhadra (1985) assesses four localities involved in the uprising and describes the concerns that motivated the insurrectionists. Depicted in detail are characters such as Shah Mal, a Jat resident of the village of Bijrauli in the *pargana* of Barout, which had suffered from over-taxation by the British in the months before the uprising. Shah Mal put together a combined force of Jat and Gujjar peasants, and attacked and plundered the *taluk* of Barout and the bazaar at Baghpat. Appointed to the post of *subhedar* (or governor) by the rebel authorities in Delhi, he then set about uniting the territory, instituting a 'hall of justice' in the bungalow of an officer of the irrigation department and assisting in the defence of Delhi against the advancing British by destroying the bridge of boats across the River Yamuna at Baghpat.

Devi Singh was perhaps the quintessential subaltern insurgent, acting entirely on his own without any contact with outsiders. He came from a Jat-dominated region centred around the small rural town of Raya in Mathura district. The land tenure system in the area was *bhayachara*, or brotherhood. In other words the village lands were divided up between different families, who paid the land revenue charge jointly. This conflicted with British attempts to distinguish individual peasant holdings in the villages and to estimate the land revenue charge on each of them. Combined with a heavy revenue demand, this brought considerable resentment, misery and indebtedness to the villages, to the benefit of individuals such as Raja Gokul Das, the largest of the Marwari moneylenders in northern central India. Using the powers of the English-style civil courts the moneylenders acquired extensive village lands in lieu of debt. Gokul Das and a number of other moneylenders lived in the town of Raya, and as soon as the *zamindars*

and villagers in the locality heard of the king of Delhi's proclamation, they immediately rose up against the moneylenders and attacked the town. Devi Singh, otherwise a man of no distinction, was dressed in yellow, the traditional symbol of royalty, and declared by popular acclaim to be the Jat 'peasant king' of the 14 villages in the locality. Upon entering the town, he proceeded to the school room, where he set up a government upon the English model – thus simultaneously demonstrating the limits of insurgent consciousness at this time (Bhadra 1985: 254). He then set about bringing the *banias*, or moneylenders to trial, interrogating them one by one, seizing their assets, ransacking their property, and destroying their mortgage deeds, surrender bonds and account books. Unfortunately, Devi Singh thought that having driven away the police he had destroyed the British *raj*. When Mark Thornhill, the collector of Muttra arrived in mid-June with a contingent of troops from Kotah, Devi Singh was quickly captured and executed.

Bhadra also details the story of Gonoo, a Kol *adivasi* and cultivator from the Singbhum district of Chotanagpur, who led the Larkha Kol insurrection in reaction to attempts by the British to interfere with traditional institutions, in particular their attempt to impose new policing demands (such as the prosecution of witchcraft) and land taxes on the community. The arrow of war was circulated, and the insurrection kicked off with a mutiny by the sepoys at Rangarh. It then escalated into a wholesale Kol insurrection under the leadership of Gonoo and others who forced the *riga* of Porahat to assume the customary role as their head. Gonoo styled himself the 'chief of Singbhum' and insisted he was merely appointed the local *sardar* by the *riga*. However, according to surviving accounts from the Kols themselves, this was a revolt initiated from below, rather than one instigated at the behest of a feudal master, and the *riga's* role was purely nominal.

Bhadra's final example is the Mauvi Ahmadullah Shah, an itinerant preacher who advocated *jihad* against the English across north India. In Fyzabad he was imprisoned, but then freed by mutinous sepoys of the irregular cavalry and 22nd Native Infantry who acclaimed him their leader. These he then led to Lucknow, where he joined in the crucial battle of Chinhat, alongside the sepoys and lumpen elements from the city population who took part. Although arousing the jealousy of the Lucknow court, his bravery convinced the troops following him of his invincibility, and contributed greatly to the heroic resistance of Lucknow against the Queen's Regiments of the British in the closing stages of the insurrection (Bhadra 1985: 267).

What all of these rebels shared was a high level of purpose and a common goal. Much as with the insurrectionists in Awadh, they were organised, usually in defence of a territory, as well as through networks of kinship, religion, or political adherence. Caste did not necessarily divide them, they received no instructions from higher authorities, and they were united in their opposition to outside, primarily British, interference. This pattern of organisation was both feasible and commonplace (Gutha 1983b; Roy 1995), and was at least as common as the more feudal forms of insurrection in support of local elites, emphasised in the accounts of Stokes (1978) and others.

**Counting the cost of war**

In times of warfare, acts of brutality are commonly committed on both sides and the 1857 uprising proved no exception. The British practice of executing rebel soldiers and officers by tying them to the mouths of cannons, so that the crowds of onlookers would be spattered with blood and the corpses dispersed over a wide area, was intended to shock. It was furthermore a deliberate offence, because blasting the body to pieces in this manner prevented either cremation or a proper burial. The British also carried out hundreds of arbitrary hangings in northern India as the fighting progressed almost hand to hand through the villages, until they were finally retaken. Marx and Engels wrote extensively at the time about the violence of the mutineers and of the British soldiers, illustrating the latter with extracts from the letters of officers sent home:

'We have power of life and death in our hands, and we assure you we spare not'. Another, from the same place: 'Not a day passes by we don't string up from ten to fifteen of them (non-combatants)'. One exulting officer writes: 'Holmes is hanging them by the score, like a brick'. Another in allusion to summary hanging of a large body of the natives: 'Then our fun commenced'. A third: 'We hold court-martials on horseback, and every nigger we meet with, we either string up or shoot'.<sup>13</sup>

By his own account, Frederick Cooper, the deputy commissioner of Amritsar, shot to death no less than 237 captured sepoys at the end of July 1857, a further 45 suffocating in cells – in a grisly re-enactment of Zephaniah Holwell's 'Black Hole' – before he had a chance to execute them. On the Indian side, there was likewise a systematic use of violence, quite apart from incidents such as the massacre in Kanpur at Satichaura Ghat. During his march through central India, Tanya Toppe, for his part, ordered that village officials who had collaborated and collected taxes for the British should have their ears and noses cut off as an example to others. In short, this was a time of bloody savagery on both sides because both were desperate to win, and believed violence to be the only language their enemy understood.

The uprising was finally quashed when the governor-general and later the first viceroy, George Canning, amidst howls of protest from the civilians of Calcutta (who petitioned for the removal of 'clemency Canning' as he was called), offered an amnesty to all who gave themselves up after the recapture of Lucknow. This proposal was then published in a General Proclamation made in the name of Queen Victoria in Allahabad on 1 November 1858, which promised to 'respect the rights of Indian Princes as our own'. By promising the non-confiscation of their lands, Canning was able to persuade 14 *talukdars* in Awadh alone to surrender immediately. Despite summary executions continuing thereafter, the amnesty greatly helped in the pacification of the population, all effective opposition coming to an end with the arrest and execution of Tanya Toppe early in 1859. The emperor Bahadur Shah was tried for treason at the age of 83, by his concessionaries for trade and the holders of the *dewanis* of Bengal (the East India

Company), and was sentenced to transportation. Carried through north India in a bullock cart on his way to Calcutta, he was then exiled to Rangoon where he died and was buried in an unmarked grave in November 1862.

Despite all that has been written on the topic, 1857 will probably remain forever clouded by confusion precisely because it has been used as a political tool both by the British, to justify their actions and their continuing rule in India, despite their unpopularity, and also by the rulers of independent India, who sought to construct a nationalist historiography which downplayed (amongst other things) the centrality of the Delhi court in the events of the insurrection. India, as the nation we know now, was created in the twentieth century, and it would be folly to attempt to trace its origins to the events of a hundred years before. Likewise it would be a mistake uncritically to accept colonial British explanations for the uprising.

The most serious consequence of the uprising was the vacating of the throne in Delhi, which paved the way for the creation of a new British imperium in India. At the same time, however, the uprising helped create a mythology of resistance that became a powerful ideological weapon in the hands of later Nationalists during the freedom struggle of the 1930s and 1940s. This was perhaps to prove to be one of its more important legacies.

## 2 The decline of Mughal India and rise of European dominion

- 1 J. Horton Ryley (ed.), *Ralph Fitch: England's Pioneer to India and Burma* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1899), p. xviii.
- 2 William Foster (ed.), *Early Travels in India 1583–1619* (Oxford: University Press, 1921), p. 296. The magnificence of the Mughal court at this time is brilliantly captured in the 1960 Indian cinema classic *Mughal-e-Azam* (director K. Asif), re-released in colour in 2004.
- 3 Paul Barroch, *The Economic Development of the Third World since 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
- 4 T.B. Macaulay, 'Lord Clive, January 1840', in *Critical and Historical Essays*, vol. 1 (London, 1846).
- 5 The concept of the 'segmentary state' was adapted by Burton Stein to explain the powerful ritual and religious role of the king compared with his limited instrumental (economic and political) authority in the pre-modern Chola empire of southern India. Modern interpretations of kingship in north India have been influenced by this idealist argument that the contestation and negotiation of power was here often more intense, giving the centre even less fixity. Notwithstanding the influence of Persian-derived administrative traditions, elements of the same argument may be applied to the later Mughal empire, which was not a purely centralised system but has been described rather as a 'patrimonial-bureaucratic' regime. See Stein (1980: esp. 264–285, 1990); Peabody (2003); Richards (1993: ch. 3); and Blake (1979).
- 6 Philip Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India* (London: Cape, 1953), vol. 1, p. 106.

## 3 Social and economic change in the early nineteenth century and the 'era of reform'

- 1 J. Peggs, *India's Ores to British Humanity: An Historical Account of Sutee, Infanticide, Ghul Murders and Slavery in India*, 2nd edn (London: Seely & Son, 1830), pp. v–vi.
- 2 J.K. Majumdar (ed.), *Indian Speeches and Documents on British Rule, 1821–1918* (Calcutta: Longmans, 1937), p. 48. Ram Mohan Roy often had complimentary things to say about British rule, but his qualifications to these remarks are commonly overlooked.
- 3 A statistical demonstration of the links between British land tenure reforms and long-term economic development trends is available in Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer, *History, Institutions and Economic Performance: The Legacy of Colonial Land Tenure in India* (World Bank discussion paper, 2002).
- 4 *Narrative by Major General John Campbell of his Operations in the Hill Tracts of Orissa for the suppression of human sacrifices and female infanticide* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1864). See also Bates (2006), ch. 3; also Padel (1995).
- 5 W.R. Moore, *Report on Female Infanticide: Selections from the Records of Government, NW Provinces* (London, 1859); Parliamentary Paper House of Commons 1843, XXXV (613) 183 Infanticide: Correspondence, 1834–42. The suppression of rites and practices associated with witchcraft was another cause célèbre at this time – see Skaria (1997).
- 6 Peggs (1830: 251), italics in original.
- 7 Minute on the Suppression of Sati by Lord Bentinck, Governor-General of India, 8 November 1829, from R. Murr (ed.), *The Making of British India 1756–1858* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1969 [1st pub. 1915]), p. 295.
- 8 Stokes (1959: 35).
- 9 T.B. Macaulay, 'Minute on Education, 2 February 1835', IOR: V/27/860/1, pp. 107, 115.
- 10 Paul Barroch, 'International industrialization levels from 1750–1980', *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (1982), pp. 269–333.

## 4 Peasant resistance, rebellion and the uprising of 1857

- 1 Conversation between Captain Lockitt and a junior cavalry officer reported to Bishop Heber during his journey through the kingdom of Awadh in 1825. Bishop Heber

*Narrative of a journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824–25...*

- (London: J. Murray, 1849), vol. 1, p. 225.
- 2 Epistle from Ghaliib to Alaaddin Khan Alai, a scion of the Loharu *nawab* family who was also a disciple of Ghaliib and a cousin of his wife. Ghaliib, *Dewan-e-Ghaliib* (Dilli: Ghaliib Academy, 1997), pp. 301–302. Mirza Asadullah Bang Khan (1796–1869), pen-name Ghaliib, was a renowned classical Urdu and Persian poet and through his *ghazals* (poetic recitations) and letters is probably the most influential author in Urdu. He resided and survived in Delhi throughout the siege of the city in 1857.
- 3 William Sleeman, *Ramaseena, or A vocabulary of the peculiar language used by the Thugs / with an introduction and appendix, descriptive of the system pursued by that fraternity and of the measures which have been adopted by the supreme government of India for its suppression* (Calcutta: G.H. Huttman, Military Orphan Press, 1836), introduction. Also Bundle file of Collected Correspondence of William Sleeman, Central Provinces Central Record Office, Nagpur Secretariat, Nagpur.
- 4 R.V. Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal, *The Castes and Tribes of the Central Provinces of India* (Nagpur: Government Press, 1916). After serving as resident at Gwalior until 1849, Sleeman then became resident at Awadh until his retirement due to ill health in 1854 and death in 1856. At Awadh, his critical reports on the administration of the state were to play a role in Dalhousie's subsequent decision to annex the state.
- 5 Vinayak Damodar (commonly Veer) Savarkar's *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* was originally written in Marathi, published in 1908, and immediately banned by the British. The author, having taken part in terrorist conspiracies in London and Nasik, was later sentenced to transportation to the Andaman islands (where he wrote about the concept of Hindutva or 'Hinduness'). He returned following a personal amnesty and was president of the Hindu Mahasabha for seven years in the 1930s and 1940s. Savarkar's *Indian War of Independence* was finally published (in English) and distributed for the first time in 1947.
- 6 This name Pandey was in turn inherited by an English children's toy – a stuffed doll wearing pyjama pants – known as 'Andy Pandey'.
- 7 Maya Gupta, 'The Yellore Mutiny', in M. and A.K. Gupta (eds), *Defying Death: Struggles Against Imperialism and Fundamentalism* (New Delhi: Tulika Press, 2001), pp. 18–38.
- 8 Karl Marx in the *New York Daily Tribune*, 1857, reprinted in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), p. 36. Marx went further, stating his belief that the wars in Persia, India and China were connected events.
- 9 The scenes in Delhi, and particularly the role of the Mughal court during the course of the mutiny, are brilliantly evoked in William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal* (Hammonds-worth: Penguin, 2006). Chapter 5 describes Bahadur Shah Zafar's reluctant acquiescence to the demands of his effective captors – the sepoj mutineers.
- 10 This proclamation was published in English in the *Delhi Gazette* on 29 September 1857, according to Charles Ball, *History of the Indian Mutiny* (London: Printing and Publishing Company, 1859), vol. 2, pp. 630–632. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, though, has argued that its author was neither Bahadur Shah Zafar nor Mirza Mughal, but the emperor's grandson, Firoz Shah, who fought in Awadh and Lucknow where this was probably first circulated. See Mukherjee (1976).
- 11 Proclamation enclosed with a translation of a pamphlet entitled *Fateh Islami*. For: Dept. Political Proc., 30 Dec. 1859, Suppl. No. 1135–1139; cited in Mukherjee (1984), p. 148.
- 12 This and many other aspects of the siege are effectively parodied in J.G. Farrell's comic historical novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* (London, 1978). A detailed blow-by-blow account of the uprising is available in P.J.O. Taylor (1997).
- 13 Karl Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, 4 September 1857, from Marx and Engels (1959).