

The Year that was 1857

India : Modern & Contemporary

● *"In one muhalla alone, Kucha Chelan, some 1,400 citizens of Delhi were cut down. 'The orders went out to shoot every soul', recorded Edward Vibart, a nineteen-year-old British officer."*

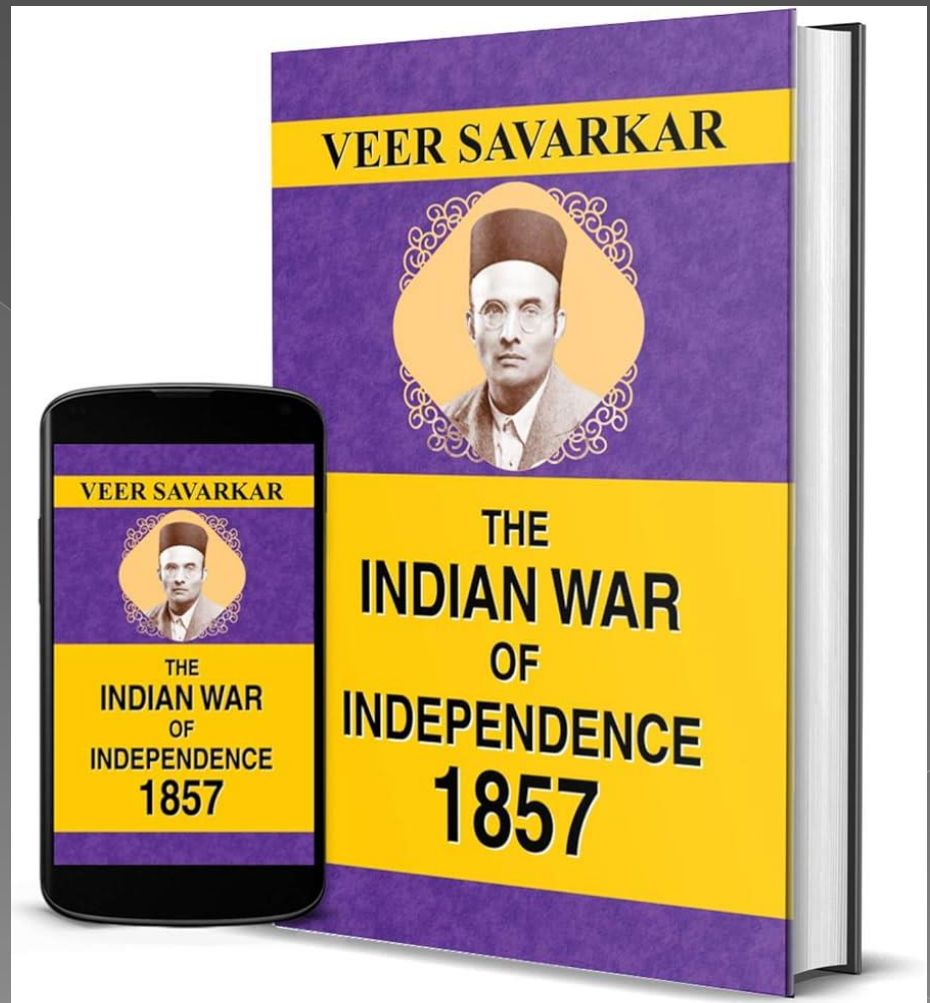
- William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal* p4,
Penguin Random House India, 2007

What was it?

- ◉ A sepoy mutiny?
- ◉ An insurgency?
- ◉ Local/national?
- ◉ First War of Independence?

- If a Marxist historian asks us to believe that religion was no big reason for the 1857 Uprising, then read 'Mutiny at the Margins' edited by Gavin Rand and Crispin Bates to think otherwise.

Veer Savarkar's work on 1857



Should we term the events of 1857 as the First War of Independence or a mere Sepoy Mutiny?



- Historians kept on researching on the events, through various lens and piecing together several pieces of information, and the results understandably have been different.

- The colonial historian has termed the events as Sepoy Mutiny, skillfully disassociating the popular component from it
- Whereas the nationalist historian has highlighted the leadership component

- ◉ Whereas much later the subaltern group of historians tried to project the contribution of the lower strata of society – from the tribal domain to ordinary soldiers at the local level.

◉ Was there any other event in India's freedom movement which was as amplified in scale and deep in intensity as the 1857 Uprising?

- ◉ Even the 1942 Quit India Movement could not achieve liberation to the extent that 1857 did – the British were ousted from Delhi from mid-May until September 1857 – a period of over four months!
- ◉ Entire north India and parts of central India revolted during 1857

- ◎ Yes, Southern part was not affected, but Vellore soldiers were up in arms in 1806.
- ◎ And where in any world revolution or movement did the entire geographical landscape burst out in violence together?

● Even the French Revolution was concentrated in major cities and some parts of the countryside, with Paris being the epicenter.

- ◎ What happened during the 1917 Russian Revolution? Workers of Petrograd came out in the open and that triggered the downfall of the Tsar.
- ◎ Without the soldiers uniting with the common folk, no movement of revolutionary fervor could be successful

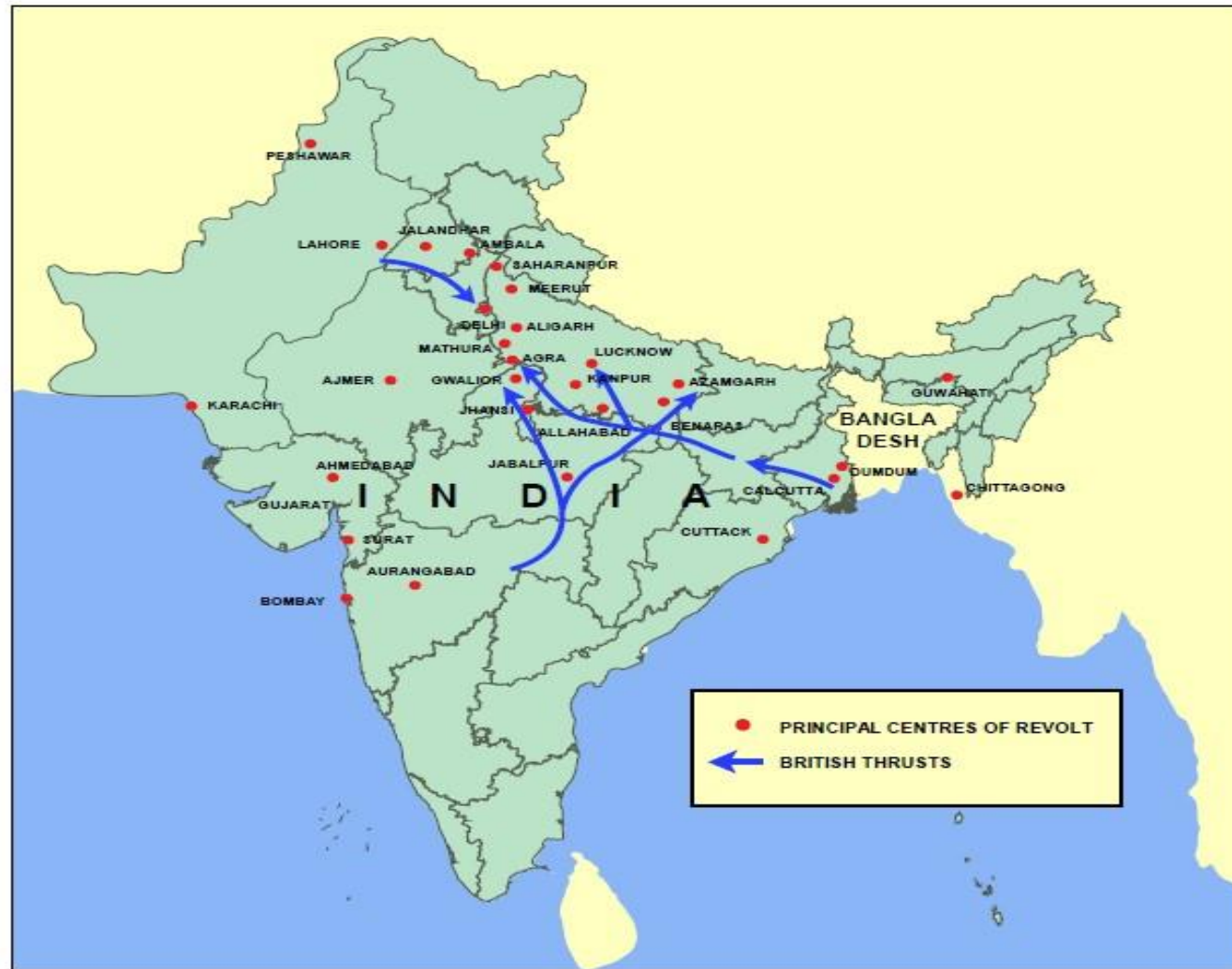
- And 1857 came so close in achieving exactly that.

- From that perspective, if 1857 was not the First War of Independence, then what was?

Beginning? Location?

- ◉ Barrackpore?
- ◉ Dum Dum?
- ◉ Ranigunj?
- ◉ Meerut?
- ◉ Delhi?

Chief centres of the movement



Karl Marx, 1852, wrote:

- ◉ *"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under the circumstances chosen by themselves, but under the circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."*

Beginning?

- Late afternoon of Sunday, 29 March 1857 when an otherwise quiet Barrackpore cantonment in the suburbs of Calcutta [now Kolkata] woke up to the shouts of a soldier of the 34th Native Infantry:
- *“Come out, you bhainchutes, the Europeans are here!.....
.....It’s for our religion.....
You have incited me to do this.....”*

- ◉ It is germane to stress on the words allegedly spoken by Pandey on 29 March :
- ◉ *"You have incited me to do this....."*
- ◉ Was he referring to his comrades of the 34th Native Infantry?
- ◉ And indeed if his comrades had incited him, then who were they?
- ◉ Did they plan a rebellion themselves or was there any external influence?
- ◉ How does one attempt to discern these aspects after over 150 years of the actual set of events?

Before Mangal Pandey

- The officer commanding the depot of musketry at Dum Dum cantonment wrote an official missive to the station staff officer at Dum-Dum regarding an issue which according to him should have raised alarm bells.
-
- The officer J A Bontein submits that in the evening of Thursday, 22 January, after the evening parade, as he preferred to listen to possible grievances or complaints from the sepoys

- “At least two-thirds of the detachment immediately stepped to the front, including all the native commissioned officers. In a manner perfectly respectful they very distinctly stated their objection to the present method of preparing cartridges for the new rifled musket.
- The mixture employed for greasing cartridges was opposed to their religious feeling, and as a remedy they begged to suggest the employment of wax and oil in such proportions as, in their opinion, would answer the purpose required.”

- This letter was a clear indication of the magnitude of the problem since two-third of the detachment had grievances regarding the greased cartridges to be used in the newly introduced Enfield Rifles having 'rifled bore' and hence greasing was necessary.
- It is evident that the gravity of the problem was duly measured by the Officer Commanding of the Musketry as he concludes his letter thus:

- “I have felt it my duty to bring this circumstance to the knowledge of the officer commanding the station, and I would further request that my report may be forwarded through the appointed channel for the consideration of his Excellency the Commander-in-Chief.”

- Bontein in his letter had referred to an accompanying report from J A Wright, Commanding the Rifle Instruction Depot to the Adjutant at Dum-Dum, dated 22 January 1857, in which Wright had mentioned:
- “.....there appears to be a very unpleasant feeling existing among the native soldiers who are here for instruction, regarding the grease used in preparing the cartridges.....”

The Unknown Khalasi

- ◉ The apparently innocuous yet alarming incident referred to in his letter by Wright was related to a certain khalasi attached to the magazine at Dum-Dum.
- ◉ The (unknown) khalasi had asked a sepoy of the 2nd Regiment, Native (Grenadier) Infantry to provide him with water from his lota (container).
- ◉ But the sepoy had refused, clearly reflecting the caste-hierarchy existing in the sub-continent during that period. The apparently disgruntled khalasi retorted that the sepoy would 'soon lose his caste as he would have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of pigs and cows'.

- Wright further informed his superior that the sepoy/sipahi/soldiers confided to him that the news regarding the greased cartridges 'has spread throughout India' like a wildfire and even if the grease is not made up of pig and cow fat, as purportedly being told, their friends (supposedly other sepoys) will not believe them.
- The soldiers in conversation with Wright further suggested that they may be allowed to make the grease themselves so that any doubt is removed.

- Wright concluded his letter by recommending the suggestions of the soldiers in allowing them to make the grease themselves so that 'any misunderstanding regarding the religious prejudices of the natives in general will be prevented'.
- Incidentally, there is no mention of the name and whereabouts of the khalasi in contention who is supposed/alleged to be the primary link to the conflagration of 1857.

The Questions

- It may also happen that the sepoys had concocted the story of the khalasi so as to shield their actual motives in rising against the English East India Company. Or it is quite likely that the khalasi being the subaltern of the most insignificant category, was not considered to be documented by the colonial masters.
- It was as if all khalasis were treated equally (or unequally but similarly) but as indistinguishable individuals. However, if the khalasi had indeed triggered the rebellion by infusing the thought process in the mind of the caste-afflicted, religiously-prejudiced Indian sepoy, then two questions apparently arise:

QUESTIONS

- ◉ a. Did the khalasi himself frame the idea of loss of caste for the sepoys and in the process acted as an agent in igniting the dialectical process in history? If yes, then was the news related to the grease a reality?

Or

- ◉ b. Was the khalasi being used by some external agents and naturally expected not to have any consciousness of his own?

- Even if the khalasi framed the idea of loss of caste on his own based on the substance used in the grease, which he obviously could, that might have been based on some hearsay, if not reality because the actual content of the grease was never brought to the fore and like the khalasi, has remained outside the realm of historical documentation.

External Agents?

- Could there be external agents inciting the rebellion by 'poisoning' the minds of the sepoys? Such a possibility did exist.
- Major-General Hearsey, commanding the Presidency Division at Barrackpore, in his letter dated 28 January 1857 to Deputy Adjutant-General of the Army expressed that in all likelihood “the Brahmins or agents of the religious Hindu party in Calcutta (the ‘Dhurma Subha’)” are spreading the rumour that the sepoys would be coerced to embrace Christianity.

- It is important in this regard to refer to what Benoy Ghosh has to write:
- “In the beginning of 1857, the whole society was in ferment in Bengal. The orthodox Hindus and the general mass of ignorant and superstitious people got alarmed at the spectacular successes of the reformers. The citadel of orthodox Hinduism was now actually on the point of collapse. Some of its massive pillars were being pulled down one by one by Rammohan, the Derozians, the Brahmo Sabhaites and the Vidyasagarites.
- The Dharma Sabhaites looked upon this as nothing but a conspiracy of the British rulers and their agents, the missionaries, to convert the entire people to Christianity by subverting their own religion.”

- Ghosh further informs that 'brilliant young men of the day like Krishnamohan Banerjee (of the Young Bengal movement) and the famous poet Madhusudan Dutt were converted to Christianity' thereby denting the prestige of the respectable families of Calcutta. Even the authorities of the Hindu College (later Presidency College) raised alarm.
- The fear of 'conversion to Christianity' had caught a feverish mood among the entire spectrum of the elites of Calcutta in the 1840s and 50s, writes Ghosh. The situation appeared so problematic that the liberal Brahmo Sabha planned to forge a united alliance with their ideological counterparts, the conservative Dharma Sabha, under the umbrella of the Tattvabodhini Sabha of Debendra Nath Tagore (father of Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore).

- A view of the opposite polarity is worth noting here. Crispin Bates and Marina Carter in their chapter titled Holy Warriors published in a series of studies (*Mutiny at the Margins*) on the events during 1857-8 mention Coopland's opinion that 'as this is completely a Mahomedan rising, there is not much to be feared from the Hindoos of Benares, who are, moreover, cowardly, unwarlike Bengalees'.

- ◉ Similarly, Ghosh cites the Hindoo Patriot of 4 June 1857 that 'the Bengalees never aspired to the glory of leading armies to battle.....their pursuits and their triumphs are entirely civil.'

- ◉ With all its allegedly emasculated image nevertheless, the Bengali dominated Dharma Sabha still had the potential to ignite the fire among the sepoys – the inevitable backbone of the organism called the Company, as the Hindoo Patriot avers:
- ◉ “A strong and versatile intellect enables them [Bengalees] to think deeply and to think farsightedly.....”

- Toward the beginning of 1857, there existed an overall atmosphere of fear of being converted to Christianity.
- Such a thesis holds firm ground as Benoy Ghosh refers to Syed Ahmed Khan (one of the key witnesses to the 1857 revolt) that the Christian missionaries frequented mosques and temples and preached their religion, and in certain districts they had the luxury of being escorted by a policeman of the thana – ostensibly flexing the administrative muscle that definitely aided their proselytizing activities and consequently exacerbated the fear among the Indian population

To Raniganj

- ◉ From the 24 Pargannas North, where Barrackpore is located, for the time being our narrative would have to shift its location to Raniganj – about 200 km away from Kolkata, in the Paschim Bardhaman district of today's West Bengal.
- ◉ Could it be a mere coincidence, as Major-General Hearsey asked in his letter to Mathew, that the bungalow belonging to a sergeant at 'Raneegunge' was burnt down by an incendiary.
- ◉ Interestingly, at that point of time, according to the words of Hearsey, Raniganj housed a wing of the 2nd Regiment, Native (Grenadier) Infantry – the same regiment whose sepoy was allegedly derided by the khalasi at Dum-Dum for the prospect of losing his caste, few days back.

Back to Barrackpore

- As if to clearly cast the spells of the bad omen and impending violence, there were three incendiary fires at Barrackpore in a span of four days between 22nd and 27th January, reports Hearsey.
- And one of the fires was at the electric telegraph bungalow – an idea which by all reasonable probability ought to have shot from a tactical mind with a strategic-cum-military vision.

- Further, definite signal of synchronized activity by an active group of mutineers could be deciphered from what Hearsey continues to aver:
- “.....Chamier of 34th Regiment, Native Infantry, having taken a lighted arrow from the thatch of his own Bungalow – has confirmed in my mind that this incendiarism is caused by ill-affected men, who wish thus to make known or spread a spirit of discontent, and induce the sepoys to believe they are all laboring under some grievances.....”

- Niladri Chatterji in his doctoral dissertation refers to the submission of Indian police officer Moinuddin Hasan Khan that 'burning of telegraph office would immediately be communicated along the line from Calcutta to Punjab, rapidly spreading the news of the arson attacks to other sepoy regiments stationed across northern India.'

Rumours?

- ◉ In the wake of these incidents, the Company deemed it expedient to conduct a Special Court of Inquiry at Barrackpore on 06 February 1857, duly presided by Colonel S G Wheler of 34th Regiment, Native Infantry.
- ◉ As many as ten witnesses (sepoys) were summoned. None of the witnesses could posit with clarity the exactitude of the problem regarding the greased cartridge to be used in the Enfield Rifle.
- ◉ Fundamentally, they referred to 'bazar reports' that there was 'some fat in the paper (making the cartridges)'.

- Havildar-Major Ajoodiah Singh's testimony on the other hand indicates peer pressure on him. Though he was rational enough to subject the cartridge paper to few tests in oil and water and then arrive at the conclusion that 'there was no grease in it', yet on the other hand he was reluctant to bite off the cartridge since by doing it, "the other men would object to it".

- One witness Chand Khan of the 7th Company, 2nd Regiment, Native (Grenadier) Infantry continued to oppose the use of the paper saying that 'everyone is dissatisfied with it on account of it being glazed, shining like wax-cloth', even though he agreed in front of the committee that there was no smell of grease in the cartridge paper after a paper was burnt in the court itself.

- Jemadar Ram Singh of the 2nd Regiment, Native (Grenadier) Infantry referred to the magazine khalasis in Calcutta from whom he thought the report about the grease had spread.
- According to Ram Singh, there could have been a number of khalasis, who reported the news related to the greased cartridges. In fact, it is quite natural that if one khalasi knew or spread the information, his comrades, at least some of them would also be privy to it.

- More militant was Jemadar Golaub Khan of the 2nd Company, 2nd Regiment, Native (Grenadier) Infantry. He raised objection to the paper, since according to him, there was a report about grease in the paper. He further asserted that he was sure that there was grease in the paper since the new cartridge paper was different from the earlier one.
- Though Jemadars Gunnes Singh and Wuzeer Khan expressed no objection to the cartridge, yet both testified that there were reports of a suspicious grease in it.

Only Mangal Pandey?

- Certainly Mangal Pandey was not the only one - may be alone on 29th March 1857 to have struck against the Company Raj - though apart from Shaikh Paltu, none resisted him.

- On Friday, the 6th of February, 1857, at about 7 PM in the evening, Lt A S Allen was sitting in the verandah of his bungalow, when a soldier intimated him of a plot amongst the sepoys 'of either plundering or burning down the bungalows at Barrackpore'. The sepoy further told him that the soldiers planned to proceed to Calcutta and attempt to seize Fort William, or failing that, to take possession of the Treasury.
- The soldier also said that the burning down of the electric telegraph office was part of a concerted plan to prevent the Government receiving speedy information.
- The sepoy was identified to be Ramsahai Lalla.

- Jemadar Durrio of the 8th Company, 34th Regiment, Native Infantry too had solemnly affirmed that on the night of 5th February 1857, two or three men (sepoys) went to his residence and goaded him to accompany to the parade ground where a larger gathering was waiting to eke out a plan for mutiny.

- Pandey's rebellion was probably a singular outburst not in sync with the overall plan. Pandey possibly missed the date and time of the mutiny. By no means however, it was a spontaneous and isolated move by a disgruntled soldier, far less a cacophony of an inebriated individual.
- The larger plan, and the rebellious backdrop in which Pandey took the centre-stage on the 29th of March 1857 is discernible by piecing together historical data.

- Pandey was one among many sepoys who were working out the details of the attack against the Company. He was one of the comrades - just that on 29th March he burst out first whereas the others were still not sure to join the bandwagon - which ultimately happened on the Sunday of 10th May at Meerut.

- Though fiercely debated among historians, yet March 29, 1857 was far from being an apocryphal day in the history of Modern India insofar as the uprising of 1857 is concerned. Havildar Shaikh Pultoo of the 34th Regiment, Native Infantry in his official submission later was unsure if Mangal Pandey was under the influence of bhaang, since he was a regular bhaang-taker
- (taking intoxicating drinks and visiting prostitutes were not uncommon among sepoys).
- But underestimating Pandey's leonine demeanour on 29th March 1857 would be a historical blunder

Meerut

- ◉ William R. Pinch adds weight to the 'local military uprising at Meerut on 10 May 1857' as the 'key factor in sparking off wider rebellion'. [Mutiny at the Margins, Ed. Crispin Bates, Vol.1, p 61, hereon MM]
- ◉ Finch argues that without the initial mutiny of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry at Meerut, the Uprising of 1857 perhaps would not have occurred.

The Prostitutes of Meerut

- While the popular and accepted version of greased cartridges is considered to be the reason for the soldiers of Meerut to rebel, yet there is hardly a mention of the prostitutes of Meerut's Sadar Bazar who constantly ridiculed the soldiers of the 3rd Light Cavalry for not having the balls to rescue their 85 comrades who had been incarcerated on 24th April and court-martialled on 9th May. [p 62, MM, Vol 1]

Mees Dolly

- ◉ Whether this provided the necessary ignition to the rest of the soldiers to come out in open outbreak against their 'masters' could definitely be a matter of debate.
- ◉ However, Pinch refers to an August 1857 letter from Captain Henry Norman, acting adjutant general of the Delhi Field Force in which he writes about a certain 'Mees Dolly of Meerut' who had been hung at Meerut for being implicated in the first outbreak of the Uprising.
- ◉ As Pinch informs, Mees Dolly was perhaps running a 'house of refreshment of sorts' in the Meerut bazar.

Eye-witness

- As if to corroborate this hypothesis of Pinch, Syed Zahiruddin Hussain Zahir Dehlvi, an eye-witness of the 1857 Uprising, then of twenty two years' age, quotes the rebel sepoys as under : [Zahir Dehlvi, Dastan-e-Ghadar, p 59, hereon Ghadar]
- “There were conspiracies being hatched in every house with group discussions and debates everywhere, especially amongst the womenfolk.....There were many women whose inheritance had been confiscated and they fanned the flames of mutiny with their taunts and sarcastic remarks. Their words were like oil in the fire of rebellion.”

Role of women

- ◉ And if these examples do not garner much credence, then we may like to listen to Andrew Ward as he mentions the prostitute Azizun who goaded the Muslim rebel soldiers to make Nunnne Nawab their leader in Kanpur.
- ◉ Ward informs that Azizun with her sword unleashed, 'was said to have moved around Kanpur' and perhaps 'survived the mutiny to testify before a police commission'.

Hazrat Mahal

- As the Company banished Wajid Ali Shah and his entourage to Calcutta on 7 February 1856, 'among those left behind in Lucknow' were many of his temporary wives or (the shia concept of) muta.
- One such temporary wife of the nawab was Mahak Pari, daughter of a slave of African origin. As she gave birth to a son named Birjis Qadr in 1845, Wajid Ali had promoted her to the rank of 'Mahal', with her new name Nawab Iftikhar-un-nisa Begam Hazrat Mahal Sahiba.
- However, in 1850, Begam Hazrat Mahal 'was one of the six wives divorced' and at the same time thrown out of the royal harem by Wajid Ali Shah.

- And as Jones writes, it was very much 'by chance' that Hazrat Mahal became 'the focus of the revolt in Lucknow'.
- It was more of a providence and far less planned when on the Sunday of 5 July 1857, the twelve-year-old Birjis Qadr was crowned 'in the Chandiwali Barahdari in Qaisarbagh.'
- Obviously with Qadr still being the minor, Begam Hazrat Mahal was the focus of authority, around which the rebellion would rotate and the rebels would draw legitimacy

- It wouldn't be out of place at all if what Wajid Ali had communicated to Viceroy Canning in July 1859 is reproduced verbatim:
- “.....Hazrat Mahal,,,having foolishly, perversely, and maliciously, set up her son Birjis Kadr in your place,,,,,,your friend [Wajid Ali Shah] was consumed with grief....”
- Such an admission may be clearly construed as an epistolary supplication of an Indian princely ruler in front of the colonial power – a deplorable act of pusillanimity

Religion galore

- Once a man asked the Prophet of Islam: “Guide me to such a deed as equals jihad [in reward].” Muhammad answered: “I do not find such a deed.” [The History of Jihad: From Muhammad to ISIS, Robert Spencer, p 42]
- Crispin Bates and Marina Carter aptly write that both the rebels and the colonial regime ‘used religion to legitimate their activities and to activate their respective forces.’ [p 41, MM, Vol 4]
- Ghulam Rasul Mihr has opined that ‘the key players’ in the 1857 revolt were ‘jihadis’. [p 42, MM, Vol 4]

Story of One Maulvi

- One such maulvi was Sayyid Ahmad Ali Khan of Chinapattan (then Madras). He actually belonged to a royal family and even said to have visited London.
- Khan had a command over the art of warfare.
- Once he returned to India, he met a Sufi saint of the Qadri order, Saiyid Furqan Ali Shah, who directed Khan – now christened as Ahmadullah Shah, to proceed to Gwalior.
- In Gwalior, Ahmadullah was initiated into the Qadri order for a second time by Mehrab Shah Qadri.
- After spending over four years under the strict guidance of Mehrab Shah, Ahmadullah was infused with the principles and practice of jihad.

The Rise of the Maulvi

- ◉ Finally, when he had supposedly graduated in the discourse of jihad, he was directed to move to Agra and spread the message of jihad.
- ◉ Ahmadullah kept on moving in north India, especially in the Awadh region, accompanied with a small band of murids or followers and spread the message of jihad against the Company Raj.
- ◉ He arrived in Lucknow in November 1856, which incidentally was reported in the Urdu weekly Tilism, edited by Maulvi Mohammad Yaqub Ansari of the seminary Firangi Mahal.
- ◉ In fact, on 30 January 1857 the weekly reported that Ahmadullah 'orally pleads for jehad' and in his mass gatherings,

The Fall of the Maulvi?

- And as an eerie coincidence, in the evening of 22 January 1857, the soldiers of the East India Company at the Dum Dum cantonment in Calcutta had for the first time raised suspicions about the greased cartridges, Ahmadullah on the other hand, planned to attack the Christians assembled in the church on a Sunday.
- But he was let down by his undisciplined followers who could not reach on time.
- The plan failed and the news was leaked to the Company administration.
- It has also been written by historian Jafri that 'thousands of' Company soldiers used to come and meet Ahmadullah during his stay in Lucknow.
- However, when police started chasing him, he left for Bahraich, and en-route halted at Faizabad.
- Ahmadullah was imprisoned at Faizabad

Other Maulvis

- ◉ And if Ahmadullah was one theologian to incite and lead the great rebellion of 1857, the 104 years old Moulvi Sulamut Ali of Kanpur issued a decree that it was right and proper for Muslims to kill Christians as heretics
- ◉ He is supposed to raise a flag and cheer the rebels.
- ◉ Not to forget Maulvi Liaqat Ali – who ‘proclaimed himself to be the governor of Allahabad under the King of Delhi’ just after the uprising took shape in the city on 6 June 1857.
- ◉ However, once the British forces recaptured the city on 11 June, the Maulvi fled and kept on evading British clutches for about 14 years.

Hindu religious component

- If the Muslim jihadi component was predominant in the Uprising, then Hindu religious component was hardly lacking.
- Historical records indicate the participation of Prayagwals of Allahabad in the 1857's war of independence. In January 1858, two of them, Rakshi Bhai and Tulsi were tried and hanged for recalcitrance.
- Another Prayagwal, Babu Pragwal of Kydganj, escaped and avoided charges
- On the whole, the Prayagwals – who were the caste of Brahmin priests or pandas and guided the pilgrims in the holy city of Prayag (or Allahabad) - had animosity against the Christian missionaries, and destroyed many churches in Allahabad (today's Prayagraj)

- ◉ Furthermore, the Urdu historian Zakaullah and an eye-witness of the 1857 Uprising, alludes to the pandits (Hindu priests) of Delhi who were encouraging the Sepoys to rise up against the Company, by referring to the Hindu Shastras (law books).

- ◉ Azamgarh proclamation of the rebels asserted that both Hindus and Muslims were being ruined by the infidel and treacherous English.
- ◉ The fundamental intention of the rebels was to throw out the infidels and bring Hindus and Muslims together.
- ◉ In Delhi, about 30,000 Muslim ghazis were fighting alongside 25,000 to 30,000 rebel sepoys.
- ◉ The underlying cause of religion was palpable

The Battle cry

- Incidentally, in the village of Hamirpur, the following proclamation was read out:
- ***“Khalq khuda ka
Mulk Badshah ka
Raj Peshwa ka”***
- ***(Khalq : creation/humankind)***

Session 2

- Up Next.....