



Forgotten voices of 1857: A study of local resistance and unknown heroes

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Abstract

The controversy of the Revolt of 1857 is that now it is seen as either a Sepoy Mutiny, which was the military discontent, or a First War of Independence that marked the nationalist realisation. Though popular histories are replete with the legendary figures of Rani Lakshmibai, Tantia Tope and Bahadur Shah Zafar, the role of myriad local leadership, peasants, tribes and women as key actors is relegated to the margins. This paper revisits the revolt from the perspective of the forgotten voices and unsung heroes whose contributions made the uprising a mass movement. Kunwar Singh of Bihar, Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad and Jhalkari Bai of Jhansi are some examples which portray how local rebellions culminated into a larger anti-movement in this regard. By combining the subaltern and regional outlook, the study states that 1857 was not only a set of fragmentary revolts but also the beginning of Indian nationalism. These shadowy actors must be identified, as they help us to understand this complexity and long-term legacy of the revolt.

Keywords: Forgotten voices, unsung heroes, subaltern perspective, regional uprisings, peasant participation, tribal resistance

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 takes a central place in the annals of colonial India. It is often touted as an initial large-scale resistance against British rule, a transformation of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. In the case of the British, it was not taken seriously initially by dismissed as a simple Sepoy Mutiny, as a riot in the ranks of the East India Company army. To the Indian nationalist historians, however, it would be remembered as the First War of Independence, a preliminary display of mass action, a prelude to the fight for Independence. Between these two interpretations is a happy grey of regional and local experiences that formed the character of revolt and its results. The uprising was a non-homoperiodic process with different layers (Chatterjee, 2024) ^[1]. The outbreak of its rebellion in Meerut, and its spread to Delhi, Awadh, Central India and a part of Bihar and Bundelkhand was indicative of both military and socio-political agitation. Policies like the Doctrine of Lapse, exploitation of the economy, onerous taxation, and perceived threat to the cultural and religious practices had already enraged large sections of the Indian society. Therefore, when the discontent of sepoys broke out, an echo was heard not only among peasants, artisans, zamindars, and tribal groups but also among deposed rulers. What is so important about the Revolt of 1857 is its symbolic strength. Its unifying effect amongst diverse communities with no centralised leadership or coordinated way of thinking transcended the colonial oppression (Prasad, 2024) ^[2]. The involvement of such leaders as Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Avantibai Lodhi, as well as the far more marginalised Jhalkari Bai and Uda Devi, pointed to the inclusivity of resistance that was not limited to the elite. The revolt is thus not restricted to militarily rebelling, as it was a broader show of discontent that defied imperial rule. In this light, the Revolt of 1857 becomes a case of local resistance, as well as a basis for forming Indian nationalism.

This paper attempts to revisit the Revolt of 1857, focusing instead on below-the-radar mobilisers and activists who determined the local and mass nature of the movement.

Unlike mainstream historical accounts of Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Lakshmibai, and Tantia Tope, among others, this study focuses on local leaders, female warriors, peasants, and the marginalised, whose protagonism has been less examined. It features people who are resisting not only in Awadh, Bihar, Bundelkhand, Central India, Rohilkhand, but also the parts of Haryana, and the form of resistance varied according to local grievances, socio-economic conditions and cultural context. The study is multi-faceted in that it draws on nationalist as well as subaltern historiography. It examines the convergence of past local resistance to land removals, heavy taxation, and the suppression of culture and the wider anti-colonial pulse. Particular focus is given to people like Kunwar Singh, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, Jhalkari Bai and Uda Devi whose involvement demonstrates the non-restrictive character of the uprising. This review, therefore, tries to unravel the lesser-known accounts of the Revolt of 1857 to show that it was not just a military uprising but a complex movement that was a combination of regional resistance and nationalism as a revival.

Research Objectives

1. To re-examine the Revolt of 1857 beyond mainstream narratives by highlighting the role of lesser-known leaders, women fighters, peasants, and marginalized groups.
2. To analyze the regional character of the revolt by studying local resistances in Awadh, Bihar, Bundelkhand, Central India, Rohilkhand, and Haryana, and their connection to the wider uprising.
3. To explore the contributions of unsung heroes such as Kunwar Singh, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, and others who have been marginalized in dominant historiography.
4. To evaluate the nature of the revolt—whether it was a series of localized uprisings driven by specific grievances or a proto-nationalist movement with broader anti-colonial consciousness.

5. To enrich historical understanding of 1857 by integrating subaltern perspectives and demonstrating how popular resistance contributed to the foundation of Indian nationalism.

Focus on Iconic Leaders

There have been various accounts of the history of the Revolt of 1857 with the British, which have mostly been told through a few famous personalities who rose as symbols of radicalism against British rule. One of them, Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in the 34th Bengal Native Infantry, can be understood as the fuse that led to what happened at Meerut and subsequently the general rebellion. His revolt against the greased cartridge became the symbol of the grievances of the sepoy community, and he was declared the first martyr of the revolt. Not less important is Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, whose leadership, courage and self-sacrifice became an unparalleled legend. Ruled out of adopting an heir to the throne by the Doctrine of Lapse, she fought against the annexation of her kingdom and fought bravely with her troops. Her work turned her into a nationalistic figure and one who serves as an example of a nationalist and a female enlisted in the struggle (Arora, 2023) ^[3]. Another widely known leader was Tantia Tope, and under him, Nana Sahib was his close associate. He exhibited excellent skills of guerrilla warfare, and even after losing in Central India, he continued the revolt. His ability to persevere and his war tactics proved that the rebellion could not be squashed quickly, and even his subsequent execution meant he was firmly cemented in the history of nationalism. In the same spirit, Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was the last Mughal emperor but had reluctantly become a stooge, was now symbolic of the unity of the rebels. The declaration of his title as Emperor of Hindustan not only gave the rebellion an Indian and even an imperial legitimacy but also impressed the world opinion. These characters take over in orthodox explanations that are popularised in nationalist writings, school curriculums, and the collective memory (Joshi, 2022) ^[4]. Although their roles cannot be discounted, such attention has tended to obscure the critical roles played by the wide variety of locals who supported the rebellion, including local leaders, women fighters, peasants, and tribals. To get the whole picture of 1857, we have to go beyond this heroic though narrow understanding.

Overlooked Voices of 1857

The Revolt of 1857 has been well documented, but most of its history has been presented in the conventional narrative around a few iconic leaders. Rani Lakshmibai, Tantia Tope, Nana Sahib, and Bahadur Shah Zafar have become household names and feature prominently in textbooks, nationalist narrations and the popular memory. Although their role cannot be underrated, this bias has resulted in the systematic impoverishment of local resistance leaders, women fighters, peasants, tribals, and marginalised communities whose actions and sacrifices provided the basis of the uprising in different parts of the country. As examples, Kunwar Singh of Bihar, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad and Rao Tula Ram of Haryana played an essential role in activating local people (Condos, 2022) ^[5]. Fighters of the same calibre, such as Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, and Rani Avantibai Lodhi, are not as famous because more noticeable persons are widely known. Similarly, millions of peasants, artisans and tribal people not only participated in

the struggle but were the victims of its suppression. Their fighting was an expression of frustrations that were based on dispossession, extortion and cultural upheaval—key factors in the plot of the uprising. The issue, however, is because of a historiographical imbalance that upholds the premise of actors who are elite and based in urban centres and neglects subaltern involvement. In British colonial histories, such actors were discredited as rebels or bandits, and later, in stressing the heroism of the elite, nationalist historians attempted to provide a unifying narrative to the national histories (Walden, 2011) ^[6]. As a result, the uprising tends to be recalled more as a set of brilliant battles that happened to be fought by larger-than-life leaders rather than, as we understand it today, as a mass movement with firm local foundations. This paper attempts to deal with this gap by bringing to the fore the voices that have long been forgotten. It aims to offer a more comprehensive and representative picture of 1857 by revealing the role that subordinate factions and less well-known leaders played, and to capture 1857 as a multilocal movement in opposition to British rule and as a first expression of Indian nationalism.

Recovering Forgotten Voices of 1857

One of the main aims of the present study is to restore the memory of the revolt of 1857 and show how local struggles, albeit varied in character, took part in the formation of a generalised nationalist imagination. Established histories have tended to reduce the revolt to its iconic leaders without giving due recognition to the efforts of many other actors who were less well-known. Still, they were critical to the upkeep of the movement throughout India. A recovery of these silenced histories attempts to enlarge the perspective on 1857 as a multifarious event. The revolt was not just the result of high-profile leaders like Rani Lakshmibai and Tantia Topce but also of the rage of the area rulers, female warriors, farmers, the tribes, and ordinary troops. Regional leaders like Kunwar Singh in Bihar, Begum Hazrat Mahal in Awadh and Rao Tula Ram in Haryana rallied local communities (Paswan, 2022) ^[7]. They gave the resistance movement a local flavour built upon grievances of dispossession, government extraction and cultural upheavals. Not less critical were those sacrifices made by women like Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi and Rani Avantibai, who were not afraid to take an active part in combat as well as fight the colonial power along with rebelling against the patriarchal norms. It is on this basis that the study pushes to integrate such local acts of rebellion into a broader context of anti-colonialism. Thus, it is wrong to view 1857 as a disintegrated uprising. Instead, it is the common outcry of rage at British rule in India, economic and cultural victimisation, which led to their bond. In a joined together pattern, these local battles set up an emergent nationalist consciousness in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gough, 1974) ^[8]. In this sense, this goal points to the necessity to incorporate the historiography of marginalised groups into the discourse on the Revolt of 1857 so that it could be beyond the grand narratives of great men in history and take into account the multitude of voices that made this historical event truly meaningful.

Historiographical Debate: Multiple Perspectives on 1857

Historiographical interpretations of The Revolt of 1857 take a variety of forms, depending upon ideological, political and methodological leanings. In the British colonial narrative, it

was the Sepoy Mutiny, which gave a military rather than political character and had an impression of a local, sporadic rebellion. British narratives tended to downplay the involvement of sepoys, women, peasants, and local leaders. They saw the uprising as being perpetrated by rebellious sepoys over grievances about conditions, pay, and the greased cartridges. This was seen as an attempt to discredit the legitimacy of the revolt as a national struggle and also as a force of colonial propaganda that weakened the unity and uniqueness of Indian abilities of self-governance. Indian nationalist historians (such as Savarkar, R.C. Majumdar and S.N. Sen) understand 1857 as the First War of Independence (Rahaman, 2024) ^[9]. Their writings cheered the rebellion as a national expression of anti-colonialism and drew attention to the legendary leaders who include Rani Lakshmibai, Tantia Tope and Bahadur Shah Zafar. Such an approach highlighted solidarity, martyrdom, and symbolism attached to the rebellion as a forefather to the systematic nationalistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Marxist and Subaltern historians critiqued the accounts of cooperation studies on the one hand and the colonial as well as Indian national accounts on the other because of neglect of the role of agency of peasants, artisans, tribals and the marginalised communities. They revealed some local sources of grievance, and these were economic exploitation, dispossession, and cultural intrusion. This way of looking at 1857 appropriates an essentially populist rebellion; indeed, there were various loci of resistance, and the development of the uprising was elaborated through regional concerns. More recently, scholarship is coming to appreciate the revolt as a hybrid phenomenon, regional in practice, and nationalist in its sentiment. Locally based insurrections based on short-term social, economic, and political dissatisfaction were united with a general anti-colonial sensibility. Historians have continued the practice of synthesising these two approaches, interrelating local acts of resistance with an emerging sense of Indian nationhood, and now talking of 1857 as a wave in the collective struggle against imperialism.

Causes of the Revolt: Political, Economic, Social, and Military Factors

The 1857 Rebellion had a compounded series of political, economic, social-religious, and military causes of the discontent vested in colonial India. Politically, the policy of expansionism, which was predominant in Britain, especially the Doctrine of Lapse, threatened the sovereignty of many princely states. The annexation of Awadh and the overthrow of rulers not belonging to the local elites alienated the local elites and provided fertile ground for rebellion. Dethroned wazirs and zamindars tended to be epicentres of local rebellions, organising peasants and troops against the British. Economic grievances further intensified dissatisfaction. The imposition of heavy taxation, erosion of traditional artisan industries under pressure of British imports and peasant distress as a result of exploitative revenue systems added to the dislocations in local economies (Bates, 2008) ^[10]. Farming communities became more and more indebted and food insecure, making them willing to support or join the rebellion. Such economic conditions were especially pronounced in places such as Bihar, Bundelkhand, and Awadh, and leaders within all these areas rallied peasants against imperial power. Social and religious factors also played a role. The threats of forced

conversion, intrusion into local, customary ways, and lack of respect for local traditions aroused a lot of fear. British policies were widely perceived as an effort to degrade the Hindu and Muslim religious conventions, thus increasing the communal level of sensitivity and leading to collective action. Finally, military causes directly triggered the revolt. Flaming resentment by Poys over low wages and failure to be promoted and improvement over greased cartridges, which were rumoured to contain pig and cow fat, became the basis of rebellion (Souza Lima, 2023) ^[11]. The revolt of the sepoys appealed to those around them, merging military rebellion and civilian demands. Collectively, these political, economic, social, and military causes serve to explain why these local leaders- including the displaced rulers and tribal chiefs- went up in rebellion. They were not only the leaders of regional uprisings, but they also linked local grievances to a larger anti-colonial struggle, which preconditioned a movement that was further divided but hugely grounded in local agitation.

Local Resistance and Unsung Heroes

The Revolt of 1857 has been kept alive both by its celebrated leaders and by many lesser-known heroes and local heroes whose role has often been ignored, a sign of how deep-seated resistance was in India. In North India, rebels like Bakht Khan provided much-needed centralisation in rebel states and the administration of conquered regions in Delhi, and in Awadh, Begum Hazrat Mahal self-proclaimed her son as king and led the rebel soldiers and peasants to wage protracted resistance until 1859, ultimately in Lucknow. In the same way, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad was termed the Lighthouse of Rebellion and rallied the people of the area and organised attacks on the British posts. In Central India, Rani Avantibai Lodhi was the tribal and peasant leader in the Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, who was a woman in grassroots opposition to the colonial power, whose heroes include Jhalkari Bai, a woman warrior of Dalit caste in Jhansi, disguised herself as Rani Lakshmibai to defend the queen, and inspire the soldiers, leading an active action among marginalised women. In the East, Kunwar Singh, an older man aged 80 years, a zamindar in Bihar, drove guerrilla campaigns in the northeast, and later his brother Amar Singh rose against the revolt, an illustration of how strong the Indian feeling was even in the remote parts of the East. In Western India, Rao Tula Ram led revolts in Rohtak and Rewari, and even sought external allies (Anderson, 2012) ^[12]. In contrast, Shah Mal Jat leader of Muzaffarnagar, mobilised the peasants, highlighting agrarian grievances as a principal determinant of block mobilisation. Other local leaders, like Peer Ali Khan, a Patna school teacher, turned revolutionary, and Azimullah Khan, advisor to Nana Sahib, played significant roles in planning and in ideology support. These unsung enslaved people represent multi-class, cross caste, and gender representations of a lack of leadership as individuals, but an example of how people fought together as a united front against colonial rule, against stereotypical notions which reinforce the idea that it was only individual leaders who contributed their parts to the national struggle.

Role of Marginalised Groups

The Revolt of 1857 was under the control not only of elite leaders but also of the marginalised groups whose contribution is often undermined but is fruitful and pivotal

to the revolt. Women warriors had a very significant and active role, other than the popular one, Rani Lakshmbai. An example was Bhagirathi Bai of Jhansi, who was a Dalit warrior woman, disguised herself as the queen to save her life and give hope to others, full of courage and tactfulness. On the other hand, Uda Devi, a Pasi woman of Awadh, went into battle and carried a weapon as well as guarding essential strongholds. In contrast, Rani Avantibai Lodhi captured and controlled tribal and peasant forces in Central India, and she mobilised local communities against British rule. These women not only defied colonial authority but also defied contemporary gender rules and played an agent role in a dominantly masculine society. The Dalits and tribal populations, as well, were in play in maintaining the revolt (Nogia, 2024) ^[13]. Although tribal groups in Central India and Bihar were not as documented in the historical memory of the elite, they participated in guerrilla movements. In contrast, Dalit fighters played a tangential role both in conducting the fight and in the provision of arsenals and forces. The involvement in their activities was associated with local grievances such as disenfranchisement of land, economic exploitation and destruction of traditional livelihoods that led them to revolt against colonial power in conjunction with soldiers and regional leaders. The impulse of the revolt was given by peasants and their ordinary reactionaries in the army. They constituted the largest group of actors, not only with their workforce but also played a pivotal role in terms of intelligence, support, and logistical backup, as well as local intelligence. With them in it, this shows that the revolt was not just a military or elite-led movement but a mass movement based on local socioeconomic realities. By acknowledging the efforts of these marginalised communities, 1857 is viewed as a community-wide rebellion where resistance arose not only on a caste, gender, and class level but also in the wider anti-colonial consciousness.

Nature of the Revolt: Local vs National

The Revolt of 1857 is of a dualistic nature inasmuch as on the one hand, local grievances of limited periods were present, and on the other hand, there was a manifestation of an agony of national aspirations. This is evidence of its local nature in terms of the variety of reasons, leadership, and regional differences. Different reasons led to the eruption of rebellion in these various regions. Awadh rose in revolt over the loss of the kingdom and the stripping of the crown of the Nawab, Bihar, due to economic exploitation and loss of land and tribal communities because of the disruption of their way of life. There were no centralised leaders, and people like Kunwar Singh, Rao Tula Ram, and Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah were leading local armed forces without any unification. In addition, the propagation of the revolt was asymmetrical, and some regions were actively opposing it. In contrast, others were tightly embraced by the British and tended to remain loyal to their side (Bates & Carter, 2017) ^[14]. At the same time, the revolt indicated an early sense of national identity. Participants would have a common rage against British policies, economic exploitation and cultural interference regardless of regions. To distinguish legality, symbols of unity and most importantly, the personification of a united India, i.e., Bahadur Shah Zafar, were conjured. His symbolic leadership attracted a locus which united irrational movements and gave them a kind of unity. A combination of all these factors shows that the revolt cannot

be classified as either a local or a national uprising. It was instead a convergence of localised rebellions that, though individually fuelled, provided a source of later national awakenings. The Revolt of 1857 was a multitude of local uprisings, yet through a feeling of shared anti-colonialism, it occurred as one step in the process of forging a larger Indian nationalist identity, and as such, represented both grassroots agency and national imagination in motion.

Legacy of the Forgotten Heroes

The participatory role of most local leaders, women fighters, peasants, and other marginalised groups during the Revolt of 1857 is one of the facts that have been undermined in historical narratives. Although names such as Rani Lakshmbai, Tantia Tope, and Bahadur Shah Zafar managed to be accepted in the nationalist imaginations, many regional players were left without any recognition. In the decades after 1857, early nationalists remembered confident leaders selectively to provide a unifying memory of resistance and, in the process, marginalised many local heroes whose lives and sacrifices had played a crucial role in ensuring the uprising continued. Even with this, the memory of these lost citizens lived on in oral traditions, folk songs and histories of the region. Tales of courage, guerrilla warfare and self-sacrifice became part of oral culture in societies, especially villages in Bihar, Awadh Subah, Central India and areas of Haryana (Major *et al.*, 2019) ^[15]. Other forms of oral and local history survived in folk accounts and ballads, commemorations of local heroes and heroines such as Kunwar Singh, Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Rao Tula Ram, and Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah. These oral and cultural customs were very significant in maintaining the spirit of fight at ground grassroots. In India today, these unknown soldiers have acquired a new symbolic significance. There are statues and memorials and other forms of regional celebrations in their honour, and now there is scholarly interest in how they contributed to the development of anti-colonial consciousness. The recognition of these figures subverts the elite-centric narrative of 1857. It puts a stranglehold on the idea that the rebellion was a result of mass widespread involvement among caste, gender, and class (Howarth, 2024) ^[16]. This helps show India as a struggle against colonialism with more inclusive ideals of the masses of those involved, as their legacy acts as a reminder of the collective agency that was employed during the uprising. Connecting these local and sideline views, contemporary historical writing recognises the complexity and the diversity of resistance that eventually led India to its road to freedom.

Conclusion

The Revolt of 1857 was sort of a milestone in Indian history that represented a local struggle, at the same time signalling the development of proto-national awareness. Although we might tend to analyse it through the prism of such legendary figures as Rani Lakshmbai, Tantia Tope, and Bahadur Shah Zafar, the local context of local revolt is also essential. The contributions of local leaders, women fighters, peasants, tribals and marginalised communities were critical to planning resistance, the supply of military forces and communities. Such historical figures as Kunwar Singh, Jhalkari Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rao Tula Ram and Uda Devi reveal how regular people and people whose image is often not included in textbooks influenced the progress of

the revolt. Their participation emphasises the mass characteristic of the revolt and points to the agency of the kind of people who have typically remained outside of the elite-centred historiography. As the revolt of 1857 was both segmental in nature, with each region handling itself independently, and centrally owned, the people were united in their aim to rebel against the colonial government. Discontent, local in origins and diverse in its sources--economic exploitation, cultural and political marginalisation--served as the main driving force behind rebellion. Still, a shared sense of anger at British policies and inspirational leadership provided a perception of shared purpose, which would later form the basis of nationalist movements. This paper highlights why current historical narratives should be rewritten in order to make these suppressed voices part of the general historical knowledge, conjoined with the revolt. Statements of appreciation of unheralded personalities not only add to our understanding of 1857 but also break away from the elite-centred interpretation of the early anti-colonial movement in India. With the experiences and sacrifices of marginalised groups and local leaders in the foreground, historians can bring a more inclusive, nuanced and accurate account on record, not just of the local realities, but of the proto-national aspirations that made up the first major uprising against colonial rule in India.

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