The Indian Rebellion of 1857

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 began as a mutiny of sepoys of the East India Company’s army on 10 May 1857, in the cantonment of the town of Meerut, and soon escalated into other mutinies and civilian rebellions largely in the upper Gangetic plain and central India, with the major hostilities confined to present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, northern Madhya Pradesh, and the Delhi region. The rebellion posed a considerable threat to East India Company power in that region, and was contained only with the fall of Gwalior on 20 June 1858. The rebellion is also known as India’s First War of Independence, the Great Rebellion, the Indian Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, the Revolt of 1857, the Rebellion of 1857, the Uprising of 1857, the Sepoy Rebellion and the Sepoy Mutiny.

Other regions of Company-controlled India – such as Bengal, the Bombay Presidency, and the Madras Presidency – remained largely calm. In Punjab, the Sikh princes backed the Company by providing soldiers and support. The large princely states of Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore, and Kashmir, as well as the smaller ones of Rajputana, did not join the rebellion. In some regions, such as Oudh, the rebellion took on the attributes of a patriotic revolt against European presence. Maratha leaders, such as Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, became folk heroes in the nationalist movement in India half a century later; however, they themselves generated no coherent ideology for a new order. The rebellion led to the dissolution of the East India Company in 1858. It also led the British to reorganize the army, the financial system and the administration in India. The country was thereafter directly governed by the crown as the new British Raj.

1. East India Company’s expansion in India

Although the British East India Company had established a presence in India as far back as 1612, and earlier administered the factory areas established for trading purposes, its victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 marked the beginning of its firm foothold in Eastern India. The victory was consolidated in 1764 at the Battle of Buxar, when they defeated Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II, who granted the Company the right for collection of Revenue in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha known as Diwani. The Company soon expanded its territories around its bases in Bombay and Madras; the Anglo-Mysore Wars (1766–1799) and the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1772–1818) led to control of the vast region of India south of the Narmada River.

In 1806 the Vellore Mutiny was sparked due to new uniform regulations that created resentment amongst both Hindu and Muslim sepoys. The reasons for the mutiny revolved mainly around resentment towards changes in the sepoy dress code in November, 1805. Hindus were prohibited from wearing religious marks on their foreheads and Muslims were required to shave their beards and trim their moustaches. In addition General Sir John Craddock, Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army, ordered the wearing of a round hat resembling that at the time with both Europeans in general and with Indian converts to Christianity. The new headdress included a leather cockade and was intended to replace the existing turban. These measures offended both Hindu and Muslim sepoys and went contrary to an earlier warning by a military board that sepoy uniform changes should be given every consideration which a subject of that delicate and important nature required.

These apparently minor changes, intended to improve the soldierly appearance of the men, created strong resentment among the Indian soldiers. In May 1806 some sepoys who protested the new rules were sent to
Fort Saint George (Madras then, now Chennai). Two of them — a Hindu and a Muslim — were given 90 lashes each and dismissed from the army. Nineteen sepoys were punished with 50 lashes each and forced to seek pardon from the East India Company.

After the turn of the 19th century, Governor-General Wellesley began what became two decades of accelerated expansion of Company territories. This was achieved either by subsidiary alliances between the Company and local rulers or by direct military annexation. The subsidiary alliances created the princely states or native states of the Hindu maharajas and the Muslim nawabs. Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, and Kashmir were annexed after the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849; however, Kashmir was immediately sold under the Treaty of Amritsar (1850) to the Dogra Dynasty of Jammu and thereby became a princely state. The border dispute between Nepal and British India, which sharpened after 1801, had caused the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–16 and brought the defeated Gurkhas under British influence. In 1854, Berar was annexed, and the state of Oudh was added two years later. For practical purposes, the Company was the government of much of India.

2. Causes of the 1857 rebellion

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 occurred as the result of an accumulation of factors over time, rather than any single event.

The sepoys were local soldiers, the majority Hindu or Muslim, that were recruited into the Company’s army. Just before the Rebellion there were over 300,000 sepoys in the army, compared to about 50,000 British. The forces were divided into three presidency armies: Bombay, Madras, and Bengal. The Bengal Army recruited higher castes, such as Rajputs and Bhumihar Brahmans, mostly from the Awadh and Bihar regions and even restricted the enlistment of lower castes in 1855. In contrast, the Madras Army and Bombay Army were more localized, caste-neutral armies that did not prefer high-caste men. The domination of higher castes in the Bengal Army has been blamed in part for initial mutinies that led to the rebellion.

In 1772, when Warren Hastings was appointed India’s first Governor-General, one of his first undertakings was the rapid expansion of the Company’s army. Since the sepoys from Bengal – many of whom had fought against the Company in the Battles of Plassey and Buxar – were now suspect in British eyes, Hastings recruited farther west from the high-caste rural Rajputs and Bhumihar Brahmans of Awadh and Bihar, a practice that continued for the next 75 years. However, in order to forestall any social friction, the Company also took pains to adapt its military practices to the requirements of their religious rituals. Consequently, these soldiers dined in separate facilities; in addition, overseas service, considered polluting to their caste, was not required of them, and the army soon came officially to recognise Hindu festivals. This encouragement of high caste ritual status, however, left the government vulnerable to protest, even mutiny, whenever the sepoys detected infringement of their prerogatives.

It has been suggested that after the annexation of Oudh (Awadh) by the East India Company in 1856, many sepoys were disquieted both from losing their perquisites, as landed gentry, in the Oudh courts and from the anticipation of any increased land-revenue payments that the annexation might bring about. Others have stressed that by 1857, some Indian soldiers, reading the presence of missionaries as a sign of official intent, were convinced that the Company was masterminding mass conversions of Hindus and Muslims to Christianity. Although earlier in the 1830s, evangelicals such as William Carey and William Wilberforce had successfully clamoured for the passage of social reform such as the abolition of sati (funeral ritual within
some Asian communities in which a recently widowed woman immolates herself, typically on the husband's funeral pyre) and allowing the remarriage of Hindu widows, there is little evidence that the sepoys' allegiance was affected by this.

However, changes in the terms of their professional service may have created resentment. As the extent of the East India Company's jurisdiction expanded with victories in wars or with annexation, the soldiers were now not only expected to serve in less familiar regions, such as in Burma, but also make do without the foreign service remuneration that had previously been their due. Another financial grievance stemmed from the general service act, which denied retired sepoys a pension; whilst this only applied to new recruits, it was suspected that it would also apply to those already in service. In addition, the Bengal Army was paid less than the Madras and Bombay Armies, which compounded the fears over pensions.

A major cause of resentment that arose ten months prior to the outbreak of the Rebellion was the General Service Enlistment Act of 25 July 1856. As noted above, men of the Bengal Army had been exempted from overseas service. Specifically they were enlisted only for service in territories to which they could march. Governor-General Lord Dalhousie saw this as an anomaly, since all sepoys of the Madras and Bombay Armies and the six General Service battalions of the Bengal Army had accepted an obligation to serve overseas if required. As a result the burden of providing contingents for active service in Burma, readily accessible only by sea, and China had fallen disproportionately on the two smaller Presidency Armies. As signed into effect by Lord Canning, Dalhousie's successor as Governor-General, the Act required only new recruits to the Bengal Army to accept a commitment for general service. However, serving high-caste sepoys were fearful that it would be eventually extended to them, as well as preventing sons following fathers into an Army with a strong tradition of family service.

There were also grievances over the issue of promotions, based on seniority. This, as well as the increasing number of European officers in the battalions, made promotion a slow progress, and many Indian officers did not reach commissioned rank until they were too old to be effective.

2.1. Tallow and lard-greased cartridges

The final spark was provided by the ammunition for the new Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle. These rifles, which fired Minié balls, had a tighter fit than the earlier muskets, and used paper cartridges that came pre-greased. To load the rifle, sepoys had to bite the cartridge open to release the powder. The grease used on these cartridges included tallow derived from beef; which would be offensive to Hindus, or lard derived from pork; which would be offensive to Muslims. At least one Company official pointed out the difficulties this may cause: unless it be proven that the grease employed in these cartridges is not of a nature to offend or interfere with the prejudices of caste, it will be expedient not to issue them for test to Native corps. However, in August 1856, greased cartridge production was initiated at Fort William, Calcutta, following a British design. The grease used included tallow supplied by the Indian firm of Gangadarh Banerji & Co. By January, the rumours were abroad that the Enfield cartridges were greased with animal fat. Company officers became aware of the rumours through reports of an altercation between a high-caste sepoy and a low-caste labourer at Dum Dum. The labourer had taunted the sepoy that by biting the cartridge, he had himself lost caste, although at this time such cartridges had been issued only at Meerut and not at Dum Dum. There had been rumours that the British sought to destroy the religions of the Indian people, and forcing the native soldiers to break their sacred code would have certainly added to this rumour, as it
apparently did. The Company was quick to reverse the effects of this policy in hopes that the Indians would be quelled.

On 27 January, Colonel Richard Birch, the Military Secretary, ordered that all cartridges issued from depots were to be free from grease, and that sepoys could grease them themselves using whatever mixture they may prefer. A modification was also made to the drill for loading so that the cartridge was torn with the hands and not bitten. This however, merely caused many sepoys to be convinced that the rumours were true and that their fears were justified. Additional rumours started that the paper in the new cartridges, which was glazed and stiffer than the previously used paper, was impregnated with grease. In February, a court of inquiry was held at Barrackpore to get to the bottom of these rumours: native soldiers called as witnesses complained of the paper being stiff and like cloth in the mode of tearing, said that when the paper was burned it smelled of grease, and announced that the suspicion that the paper itself contained grease could not be removed from their minds.

2.2. Civilian disquiet

The civilian rebellion was more multifarious. The rebels consisted of three groups: the feudal nobility, rural landlords called _taluqdars_, and the peasants. The nobility, many of whom had lost titles and domains under the Doctrine of Lapse, which refused to recognise the adopted children of princes as legal heirs, felt that the Company had interfered with a traditional system of inheritance. Rebel leaders such as Nana Sahib and the Rani of Jhansi belonged to this group; the latter, for example, was prepared to accept East India Company supremacy if her adopted son was recognised as her late husband’s heir. In other areas of central India, such as Indore and Saugar, where such loss of privilege had not occurred, the princes remained loyal to the Company even in areas where the sepoys had rebelled. The second group, the _taluqdars_, had lost half their landed estates to peasant farmers as a result of the land reforms that came in the wake of annexation of Oudh. As the rebellion gained ground, the _taluqdars_ quickly reoccupied the lands they had lost, and paradoxically, in part due to ties of kinship and feudal loyalty, did not experience significant opposition from the peasant farmers, many of whom joined the rebellion, to the great dismay of the British. It has also been suggested that heavy land-revenue assessment in some areas by the British resulted in many landowning families either losing their land or going into great debt with money lenders, and providing ultimately a reason to rebel; money lenders, in addition to the Company, were particular objects of the rebels’ animosity. The civilian rebellion was also highly uneven in its geographic distribution, even in areas of north-central India that were no longer under British control. For example, the relatively prosperous Muzaffarnagar district, a beneficiary of a Company irrigation scheme, and next door to Meerut, where the upheaval began, stayed mostly calm throughout.

Much of the resistance to the Company came from the old aristocracy, who were seeing their power steadily eroded. The company had annexed several states under the Doctrine of Lapse, according to which land belonging to a feudal ruler became the property of the East India Company if on his death, the ruler did not leave a male heir through natural process. It had long been the custom for a childless landowner to adopt an heir, but the East India Company ignored this tradition. Nobility, feudal landholders, and royal armies found themselves unemployed and humiliated due to Company expansionism. Even the jewels of the royal family of Nagpur were publicly auctioned in Calcutta, a move that was seen as a sign of abject disrespect by the remnants of the Indian aristocracy. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India, had asked the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and his successors to leave the Red Fort, the palace in
Delhi. Later, Lord Canning, the next Governor-General of India, announced in 1856 that Bahadur Shah’s successors would not even be allowed to use the title of ‘king’. Such discourtesies were resented by the deposed Indian rulers.

Utilitarian and evangelical-inspired social reform, including the abolition of sati and the legalisation of widow remarriage were considered by many — especially the British themselves — to have caused suspicion that Indian religious traditions were being interfered with, with the ultimate aim of conversion. Recent historians, including Chris Bayly, have preferred to frame this as a clash of knowledges, with proclamations from religious authorities before the revolt and testimony after it including on such issues as the insults to women, the rise of low persons under British tutelage, the pollution caused by Western medicine and the persecuting and ignoring of traditional astrological authorities. European-run schools were also a problem: according to recorded testimonies, anger had spread because of stories that mathematics was replacing religious instruction, stories were chosen that would bring contempt upon Indian religions, and because girl children were exposed to moral danger by education.

The justice system was considered to be inherently unfair to the Indians. The official Blue Books, *East India (Torture) 1855–1857*, laid before the House of Commons during the sessions of 1856 and 1857 revealed that Company officers were allowed an extended series of appeals if convicted or accused of brutality or crimes against Indians. It was also revealed that the officers had freedom to collect revenue via extortion in many cases. The economic policies of the East India Company were also resented by many Indians.

2.3. The Bengal Army

Each of the three Presidencies into which the East India Company divided India for administrative purposes maintained their own armies. Of these, the Army of the Bengal Presidency was the largest. Unlike the other two, it recruited heavily from among high-caste Hindus, and comparatively wealthy Muslims. The Muslims formed a larger percentage of the Irregular units within the Bengal army, whilst Hindus were mainly to be found in the regular units. The sepoys were therefore affected to a large degree by the concerns of the landholding and traditional members of Indian society. In the early years of the Company rule, they tolerated and even encouraged the caste privileges and customs within the Bengal Army, which recruited its regular soldiers almost exclusively amongst the landowning Bhumihar Brahmins and Rajputs of the Ganges Valley. By the time these customs and privileges came to be threatened by modernising regimes in Calcutta from the 1840s onwards, the sepoys had become accustomed to very high ritual status, and were extremely sensitive to suggestions that their caste might be polluted.

The sepoys also gradually became dissatisfied with various other aspects of army life. Their pay was relatively low and after Awadh and the Punjab were annexed, the soldiers no longer received extra pay (*batta* or *bhatta*) for service there, because they were no longer considered foreign missions. The junior European officers were increasingly estranged from their soldiers, in many cases treating them as their racial inferiors. Officers of an evangelical persuasion in the Company’s Army (such as Herbert Edwardes and Colonel S.G. Wheler) had taken to preaching to their sepoys in the hope of converting them to Christianity. In 1856, a new Enlistment Act was introduced by the Company, which in theory made every unit in the Bengal Army liable to service overseas. Although it was intended to apply to new recruits only, the sepoys feared that the Act might be applied retroactively to them as well. It was argued that a high-caste Hindu
who travelled in the cramped, squalid conditions of a troop ship would find it impossible to avoid losing caste through ritual pollution.

3. Onset of the Rebellion

Several months of increasing tensions coupled with various incidents preceded the actual rebellion. [...] On 26 February 1857 the 19th Bengal Native Infantry (BNI) regiment became concerned that new cartridges they had been issued were wrapped in paper greased with cow and pig fat, which had to be opened by mouth thus affecting their religious sensibilities. Their Colonel confronted them supported by artillery and cavalry on the parade ground, but after some negotiation withdrew the artillery, and cancelled the next morning’s parade.

3.1. Mangal Pandey

During April, there was unrest and fires at Agra, Allahabad and Ambala. At Ambala in particular, which was a large military cantonment where several units had been collected for their annual musketry practice, it was clear to General Anson, Commander-in-Chief of the Bengal Army, that some sort of rebellion over the cartridges was imminent. Despite the objections of the civilian Governor-General’s staff, he agreed to postpone the musketry practice, and allow a new drill by which the soldiers tore the cartridges with their fingers rather than their teeth. However, he issued no general orders making this standard practice throughout the Bengal Army and, rather than remain at Ambala to defuse or overawe potential trouble, he then proceeded to Simla, the cool hill station where many high officials spent the summer.

Although there was no open revolt at Ambala, there was widespread arson during late April. Barrack buildings (especially those belonging to soldiers who had used the Enfield cartridges) and European officers’ bungalows were set on fire.

3.2. Meerut and Delhi

At Meerut was another large military cantonment where 2,357 Indian sepoys and 2,038 British soldiers were stationed, with 12 British-manned guns. The station held one of the largest concentrations of British troops in India and this was later to be cited as evidence that the original rising was a spontaneous outbreak rather than a pre-planned plot.

Although the state of unrest within the Bengal Army was well known, on 24 April Lieutenant Colonel George Carmichael-Smyth, the unsympathetic commanding officer of the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry, ordered 90 of his men to parade and perform firing drills. All except five of the men on parade refused to accept their cartridges. On 9 May, the remaining 85 men were court martialled, and most were sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment with hard labour. Eleven comparatively young soldiers were given five years’ imprisonment. The entire garrison was paraded and watched as the condemned men were stripped of their uniforms and placed in shackles. As they were marched off to jail, the condemned soldiers berated their comrades for failing to support them.

The next day was Sunday, the Christian day of rest and worship. Some Indian soldiers warned off-duty junior European officers that plans were afoot to release the imprisoned soldiers by force, but the senior officers to whom this was reported in turn took no action. There was also unrest in the city of Meerut itself,
with angry protests in the bazaar and some buildings being set on fire. In the evening, most European officers were preparing to attend church, while many of the European soldiers were off duty and had gone into canteens or into the bazaar in Meerut. The Indian troops, led by the 3rd Cavalry, broke into revolt. European junior officers who attempted to quell the first outbreaks were killed by their own men. European officers' and civilians' quarters were attacked, and four civilian men, eight women and eight children were killed. Crowds in the bazaar attacked the off-duty soldiers there. About 50 Indian civilians, some officers' servants who tried to defend or conceal their employers, were also killed by the sepoys. 47

Within the city of Meerut, the Kotwal Dhan Singh Gurjar opened the gate of the jail. Kotwal Dhan Singh was the leader of Meerut Kranti. He was greatly supported by his community gurjar and Tyagis. A total of about 50 European men including soldiers, women and children were killed in Meerut by sepoys and crowds on the evening of 10 May. The sepoys freed their 85 imprisoned comrades from the jail, along with 800 other prisoners. 54

Some sepoys (especially from the 11th Bengal Native Infantry) escorted trusted British officers and women and children to safety before joining the revolt. Some officers and their families escaped to Rampur, where they found refuge with the Nawab.

The senior Company officers, in particular Major General Hewitt, the commander of the division, were slow to react. The British troops, mainly the 1st Battalion of the 60th Rifles, the 6th Dragoon Guards and two European-manned batteries of the Bengal Artillery, rallied, but received no orders to engage the rebellious sepoys and could only guard their own headquarters and armouries. On the following morning when they prepared to attack, they found Meerut was quiet and that the rebels had marched off to Delhi.

The British historian Philip Mason notes that it was inevitable that most of the sepoys and sowars from Meerut should have made for Delhi on the night of 10 May. It was a strong walled city located only forty miles away, it was the ancient capital and present seat of the Mughal Emperor and finally there were no British troops in garrison there in contrast to Meerut. No effort was made to pursue them.

Early on 11 May, the first parties of the 3rd Cavalry reached Delhi. From beneath the windows of the King's apartments in the palace, they called on him to acknowledge and lead them. Bahadur Shah did nothing at this point, apparently treating the sepoys as ordinary petitioners, but others in the palace were quick to join the revolt. During the day, the revolt spread. Gujjars from Chandrawal, led by Chaudhry Daya Ram, destroyed the house of Chief Magistrate Theophilus Metcalfe. European officials and dependents, Indian Christians and shop keepers within the city were killed, some by sepoys and others by crowds of rioters.

There were three battalions of Bengal Native Infantry stationed in or near the city. Some detachments quickly joined the rebellion, while others held back but also refused to obey orders to take action against the rebels. In the afternoon, a violent explosion in the city was heard for several miles. Fearing that the arsenal, which contained large stocks of arms and ammunition, would fall intact into rebel hands, the nine British Ordnance officers there had opened fire on the sepoys, including the men of their own guard. When resistance appeared hopeless, they blew up the arsenal. Although six of the nine officers survived, the blast killed many in the streets and nearby houses and other buildings. The news of these events finally tipped the sepoys stationed around Delhi into open rebellion. The sepoys were later able to salvage at least some arms from the arsenal, and a magazine two miles (3 km) outside Delhi, containing up to 3,000 barrels of gunpowder, was captured without resistance.
Many fugitive European officers and civilians had congregated at the Flagstaff Tower on the ridge north of Delhi, where telegraph operators were sending news of the events to other British stations. When it became clear that the help expected from Meerut was not coming, they made their way in carriages to Karnal. Those who became separated from the main body or who could not reach the Flagstaff Tower also set out for Karnal on foot. Some were helped by villagers on the way, others were killed.

The next day, Bahadur Shah held his first formal court for many years. It was attended by many excited or unruly sepoys. The King was alarmed by the turn events had taken, but eventually accepted the sepoys’ allegiance and agreed to give his countenance to the rebellion. On 16 May, up to 50 Europeans who had been held prisoner in the palace or had been discovered hiding in the city were killed by some of the King’s servants under a peepul tree in a courtyard outside the palace.

3.3. Support and opposition

The news of the events at Delhi spread rapidly, provoking uprisings among sepoys and disturbances in many districts. In many cases, it was the behaviour of British military and civilian authorities themselves which precipitated disorder. Learning of the fall of Delhi by telegraph, many Company administrators hastened to remove themselves, their families and servants to places of safety. The haste with which many civilians left their posts encouraged rebellions in the areas they left, although others remained at their posts until it was clearly impossible to maintain any sort of order. Several were murdered by rebels or lawless gangs.

The military authorities also reacted in disjointed manner. Some officers trusted their sepoys, but others tried to disarm them to forestall potential uprisings. At Benares and Allahabad, the disarmings were bungled, also leading to local revolts.

Although rebellion became widespread, there was little unity among the rebels. While Bahadur Shah Zafar was restored to the imperial throne there was a faction that wanted the Maratha rulers to be enthroned also, and the Awadhis wanted to retain the powers that their Nawab used to have.

There were calls for jihad by Muslim leaders like Maulana Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi and the millenarian Ahmedullah Shah, which were taken up by Muslims, particularly artisans, which caused the British to think that the Muslims were the main force behind this event. The Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, resisted these calls for jihad because, it has been suggested, he feared outbreaks of communal violence. In Awadh, Sunni Muslims did not want to see a return to Shiite rule, so they often refused to join what they perceived to be a Shia rebellion. However, some Muslims like the Aga Khan supported the British. The British rewarded him by formally recognising his title.

Although most of the rebellious sepoys in Delhi were Hindus, a significant proportion of the insurgents were Muslims. The proportion of ghazis grew to be about a quarter of the local fighting force by the end of the siege, and included a regiment of suicide ghazis from Gwalior who had vowed never to eat again and to fight until they met certain death at the hands of British troops.

In Thana Bhawan, the Sunnis declared Haji Imdadullah their Ameer. In May 1857 the Battle of Shamli took place between the forces of Haji Imdadullah and the British.
The Sikhs and Pathans of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province supported the British and helped in the recapture of Delhi. Historian John Harris has asserted that the Sikhs wanted to avenge the annexation of the Sikh Empire eight years earlier by the Company with the help of Purabias ('Easterners'); Biharis and those from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh who had formed part of the East India Company’s armies in the First and Second Anglo-Sikh Wars. He has also suggested that Sikhs felt insulted by the attitude of sepoys who in their view had only beaten the Khalsa with British help; they resented and despised them far more than they did the British.

The Sikhs feared reinstatement of Mughal rule in North India because they had been persecuted heavily in the past by the Mughal dynasty.

Huge Sikh support for the British resulted from grievances surrounding Sepoys’ perceived conduct during and after the Anglo-Sikh Wars. Firstly, many Sikhs resented that Hindustanis in service of the Sikh state had been foremost in urging the wars which lost them their independence. Sikh soldiers also recalled that the bloodiest battles of the war, Chillianwala and Ferozeshah, were won by British troops, and they believed that the Hindustani sepoys had refused to meet them in battle. These feelings were compounded when Hindustani Sepoys were assigned a very visible role as garrison troops in Punjab and awarded profit-making civil posts in Punjab.

4. The Revolt [the text of this section is starkly abridged]
4.1. Initial stages

Bahadur Shah Zafar was proclaimed the Emperor of the whole of India. Most contemporary and modern accounts suggest that he was coerced by the sepoys and his courtiers to sign the proclamation against his will. In spite of the significant loss of power that the Mughal dynasty had suffered in the preceding centuries, their name still carried great prestige across northern India. The civilians, nobility and other dignitaries took the oath of allegiance to the Emperor. The British, who had long ceased to take the authority of the Mughal Emperor seriously were astonished at how the ordinary people responded to Zafar’s call for war. The Emperor issued coins in his name, one of the oldest ways of asserting Imperial status, and his name was added to the acceptance by Muslims that he is their King. This proclamation, however, turned the Sikhs of Punjab away from the rebellion, as they did not want to return to Islamic rule, having fought many wars against the Mughal rulers. The province of Bengal was largely quiet throughout the entire period.

Initially, the Indian soldiers were able to significantly push back Company forces, and captured several important towns in Haryana, Bihar, Central Provinces and the United Provinces. When the European troops were reinforced and began to counterattack, the sepoys who mutinied were especially handicapped by their lack of a centralised command and control system. Although they produced some natural leaders such as Bakht Khan, whom the Emperor later nominated as commander-in-chief after his son Mirza Mughal proved ineffectual, for the most part they were forced to look for leadership to rajahs and princes. Some of these were to prove dedicated leaders, but others were self-interested or inept.

The British were slow to strike back at first. It took time for troops stationed in Britain to make their way to India by sea, although some regiments moved overland through Persia from the Crimean War, and some regiments already en route for China were diverted to India.
It took time to organise the European troops already in India into field forces, but eventually two columns left Meerut and Simla. They proceeded slowly towards Delhi and fought, killed, and hanged numerous Indians along the way. Two months after the first outbreak of rebellion at Meerut, the two forces met near Karnal. The combined force including two Gurkha units serving in the Bengal Army under contract from the Kingdom of Nepal, fought the main army of the rebels at Badli-ke-Serai and drove them back to Delhi.

The Company established a base on the Delhi ridge to the north of the city and the Siege of Delhi began. The siege lasted roughly from 1 July to 21 September. However, the encirclement was hardly complete, and for much of the siege the Company forces were outnumbered and it often seemed that it was the Company forces and not Delhi that was under siege, as the rebels could easily receive resources and reinforcements. For several weeks, it seemed that disease, exhaustion and continuous sorties by rebels from Delhi would force the Company forces to withdraw, but the outbreaks of rebellion in the Punjab were forestalled or suppressed, allowing the Punjab Movable Column of British, Sikh and Pakhtun soldiers to reinforce the besiegers on the Ridge on 14 August. On 30 August the rebels offered terms, which were refused.

An eagerly awaited heavy siege train joined the besieging force, and from 7 September, the siege guns battered breaches in the walls and silenced the rebels’ artillery. An attempt to storm the city through the breaches and the Kashmiri Gate was launched on 14 September. The attackers gained a foothold within the city but suffered heavy casualties. The British commander wished to withdraw, but was persuaded to hold on by his junior officers. After a week of street fighting, the British reached the Red Fort. Bahadur Shah Zafar had already fled to Humayun’s tomb. The British had retaken the city.

The troops of the besieging force proceeded to loot and pillage the city. A large number of the citizens were killed in retaliation for the Europeans and Indian civilians that had been killed by the rebel sepoys. During the street fighting, artillery had been set up in the main mosque in the city and the neighbourhoods within range were bombarded. These included the homes of the Muslim nobility from all over India, and contained innumerable cultural, artistic, literary and monetary riches.

Shortly after the fall of Delhi, the victorious attackers organised a column which relieved another besieged Company force in Agra, and then pressed on to Cawnpore, which had also recently been recaptured. This gave the Company forces a continuous, although still tenuous, line of communication from the east to west of India.

4.2. Cawnpore

In June, sepoys under General Wheeler in Cawnpore (Kanpur) rebelled and besieged the European entrenchment. Wheeler was not only a veteran and respected soldier, but also married to a high-caste Indian lady. He had relied on his own prestige, and his cordial relations with the Nana Sahib to thwart rebellion, and took comparatively few measures to prepare fortifications and lay in supplies and ammunition.

The besieged endured three weeks of the Siege of Cawnpore with little water or food, suffering continuous casualties to men, women and children. On 25 June Nana Sahib made an offer of safe passage to Allahabad. With barely three days' food rations remaining, the British agreed provided they could keep their small arms and that the evacuation should take place in daylight on the morning of the 27th. Early in the morning, the European party left their entrenchment and made their way to the river where boats
provided by the Nana Sahib were waiting to take them to Allahabad. Several sepoys who had stayed loyal to the Company were removed by the mutineers and killed, either because of their loyalty or because they had become Christian. A few injured British officers trailing the column were also apparently hacked to death by angry sepoys. After the European party had largely arrived at the dock, which was surrounded by sepoys positioned on both banks of the Ganges, with clear lines of fire, firing broke out and the boats were abandoned by their crew, and caught or were set on fire using pieces of red hot charcoal. The British party tried to push the boats off but all except three remained stuck. Towards the end rebel cavalry rode into the water to finish off any survivors. After the firing ceased the survivors were rounded up and the men shot. By the time the massacre was over, most of the male members of the party were dead while the surviving women and children were removed and held hostage to be later killed in The Bibigarh massacre.

Whether the firing was planned or accidental remains unresolved. Most early histories assume it was planned either by the Nana Sahib or that Tatya Tope and Brigadier Jwala Pershad planned it without the Nana Sahib's knowledge. During his trial, Tatya Tope denied the existence of any such plan and described the incident in the following terms: the Europeans had already boarded the boats and Tatya Tope raised his right hand to signal their departure. That very moment someone from the crowd blew a loud bugle which created disorder and in the ongoing bewilderment, the boatmen jumped off the boats. The rebels started shooting indiscriminately. Some British histories allow that it might well have been the result of accident or error; someone accidentally or maliciously fired a shot, the panic-stricken British opened fire, and it became impossible to stop the massacre.

The surviving women and children were taken to the Nana Sahib. Overall five men and two hundred and six women and children were confined in The Bibigarh for about two weeks. In one week 25 were brought out dead, due to dysentery and cholera. Meanwhile a Company relief force that had advanced from Allahabad defeated the Indians and by 15 July it was clear that the Nana Sahib would not be able to hold Cawnpore and a decision was made by the Nana Sahib and other leading rebels that the hostages must be killed. After the sepoys refused to carry out this order, two Muslim butchers, two Hindu peasants and one of Nana’s bodyguards went into The Bibigarh. Armed with knives and hatchets they murdered the women and children. After the massacre the walls were covered in bloody hand prints, and the floor littered with fragments of human limbs.

The killing of the women and children hardened British attitudes against the sepoys. The British public was aghast and the anti Imperial and pro-Indian proponents lost all their support. Cawnpore became a war cry for the British and their allies for the rest of the conflict.

When the British retook Cawnpore, the soldiers took their sepoy prisoners to The Bibigarh and forced them to lick the bloodstains from the walls and floor. They then hanged or blew from the cannon, the traditional Mughal punishment for mutiny, the majority of the sepoy prisoners. Although some claimed the sepoys took no actual part in the killings themselves, they did not act to stop it.

4.3. Lucknow

Very soon after the events in Meerut, rebellion erupted in the state of Awadh (also known as Oudh, in modern-day Uttar Pradesh), which had been annexed barely a year before. The British Commissioner resident at Lucknow, Sir Henry Lawrence, had enough time to fortify his position inside the Residency compound. The Company forces numbered some 1700 men, including loyal sepoys. The rebels' assaults
were unsuccessful, and so they began a barrage of artillery and musket fire into the compound. Lawrence was one of the first casualties. The rebels tried to breach the walls with explosives and bypass them via underground tunnels that led to underground close combat. After 90 days of siege, defended by John Eardley Inglis, numbers of Company forces were reduced to 300 loyal sepoys, 350 British soldiers and 550 non-combatants.

On 25 September a relief column fought its way from Cawnpore to Lucknow in a brief campaign in which the numerically small column defeated rebel forces in a series of increasingly large battles. In October another, larger, army was finally able to relieve the garrison and on 18 November, they evacuated the defended enclave within the city, the women and children leaving first. They then conducted an orderly withdrawal to Cawnpore, where they defeated an attempt by Tatya Tope to recapture the city in the Second Battle of Cawnpore.

Early in 1858, the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Colin Campbell advanced on Lucknow with a large army, this time seeking to suppress the rebellion in Awadh. He was aided by a large Nepalese contingent advancing from the north under Jang Bahadur, who decided to side with the Company in December 1857. Campbell’s advance was slow and methodical, and drove the large but disorganised rebel army from Lucknow with few casualties to his own troops. This nevertheless allowed large numbers of the rebels to disperse into Awadh, and Campbell was forced to spend the summer and autumn dealing with scattered pockets of resistance while losing men to heat, disease and guerrilla actions.

5. Aftermath

The rebels’ murder of women, children and wounded British soldiers at Cawnpore, and the subsequent printing of the events in the British papers, left many British soldiers seeking revenge. As well as hanging mutineers, the British had some blown from cannon, (an old Mughal punishment adopted many years before in India), in which sentenced rebels were tied over the mouths of cannons and blown to pieces when the guns were fired.

Most of the British press, outraged by the reports of rape and the killings of civilians and wounded British soldiers, did not advocate clemency of any kind. Governor General Canning ordered moderation in dealing with native sensibilities and earned the scornful sobriquet Clemency Canning from the press and later parts of the British public.

In terms of sheer numbers, the casualties were much higher on the Indian side. A letter published after the fall of Delhi in the Bombay Telegraph and reproduced in the British press testified to the scale of the Indian casualties:

..... All the city’s people found within the walls of the city of Delhi when our troops entered were bayoneted on the spot, and the number was considerable, as you may suppose, when I tell you that in some houses forty and fifty people were hiding. These were not mutineers but residents of the city, who trusted to our well-known mild rule for pardon. I am glad to say they were disappointed.

From the end of 1857, the British had begun to gain ground again. Lucknow was retaken in March 1858. On 8 July 1858, a peace treaty was signed and the rebellion ended. The last rebels were defeated in Gwalior on 20 June 1858. By 1859, rebel leaders Bakht Khan and Nana Sahib had either been slain or had fled.
Edward Vibart, a 19-year-old officer whose parents, younger brothers, and two of his sisters had died in the Cawnpore massacre, recorded his experience:

The orders went out to shoot every soul.... It was literally murder... I have seen many bloody and awful sights lately but such a one as I witnessed yesterday I pray I never see again. The women were all spared but their screams on seeing their husbands and sons butchered, were most painful... Heaven knows I feel no pity, but when some old grey bearded man is brought and shot before your very eyes, hard must be that man's heart I think who can look on with indifference...

Some British troops adopted a policy of no prisoners. One officer, Thomas Lowe, remembered how on one occasion his unit had taken 76 prisoners – they were just too tired to carry on killing and needed a rest, he recalled. Later, after a quick trial, the prisoners were lined up with a British soldier standing a couple of yards in front of them. On the order fire, they were all simultaneously shot, swept... from their earthly existence. In all more than 100,000 Indians were killed in the Uprising and its aftermath.

The aftermath of the rebellion has been the focus of new work using Indian sources and population studies. In The Last Mughal, historian William Dalrymple examines the effects on the Muslim population of Delhi after the city was retaken by the British and finds that intellectual and economic control of the city shifted from Muslim to Hindu hands because the British, at that time, saw an Islamic hand behind the mutiny.

5.1. Reaction in Britain

The scale of the punishments handed out by the British Army of Retribution were considered largely appropriate and justified in a Britain shocked by reports of atrocities carried out against British and European civilians, and local Christians by the rebels. Accounts of the time frequently reach the hyperbolic register, according to Christopher Herbert, especially in the often-repeated claim that the Red Year of 1857 marked a terrible break in British experience. Such was the atmosphere – a national mood of retribution and despair that led to almost universal approval of the measures taken to pacify the revolt.

The incidents of rape committed by Indian rebels against European women and girls appalled the British public. These atrocities were often used to justify the British reaction to the rebellion. British newspapers printed various eyewitness accounts of the rape of English women and girls. One such account published by The Times, regarding an incident where 48 English girls as young as 10 had been raped by Indian rebels in Delhi. The story was criticized as a false propaganda story by Karl Marx, who pointed out that the story was written by a clergyman in Bangalore, far from the events of the rebellion. Individual incidents captured the public's interest and were heavily reported by the press. Long after the political recovery was done, women were the focal point and symbol of any distrust the British had in India. Women's fragile female bodies were violated by the mutiny's incidents of rape and Britain immediately reacted in vicious...reprisals against the local population. However, Indian women at the time are still undocumented from the official male sources. Further research could lend insight to both sides of the situation during the rebellion of 1857.

6. Reorganization

Bahadur Shah was tried for treason by a military commission assembled at Delhi, and exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862, bringing the Mughal dynasty to an end. In 1877 Queen Victoria took the title of Empress of India on the advice of Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli.
The rebellion saw the end of the East India Company's rule in India. In August, by the Government of India Act 1858, the company was formally dissolved and its ruling powers over India were transferred to the British Crown. A new British government department, the India Office, was created to handle the governance of India, and its head, the Secretary of State for India, was entrusted with formulating Indian policy. The Governor-General of India gained a new title, Viceroy of India, and implemented the policies devised by the India Office. The British colonial administration embarked on a program of reform, trying to integrate Indian higher castes and rulers into the government and abolishing attempts at Westernization. The Viceroy stopped land grabs, decreed religious tolerance and admitted Indians into civil service, albeit mainly as subordinates.

Essentially the old East India Company bureaucracy remained, though there was a major shift in attitudes. In looking for the causes of the Rebellion the authorities alighted on two things: religion and the economy. On religion it was felt that there had been too much interference with indigenous traditions, both Hindu and Muslim. On the economy it was now believed that the previous attempts by the Company to introduce free market competition had undermined traditional power structures and bonds of loyalty placing the peasantry at the mercy of merchants and money-lenders. In consequence the new British Raj was constructed in part around a conservative agenda, based on a preservation of tradition and hierarchy.

On a political level it was also felt that the previous lack of consultation between rulers and ruled had been yet another significant factor in contributing to the uprising. In consequence, Indians were drawn into government at a local level. Though this was on a limited scale a crucial precedent had been set, with the creation of a new ‘white collar’ Indian elite, further stimulated by the opening of universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, a result of the Indian Universities Act. So, alongside the values of traditional and ancient India, a new professional middle class was starting to arise, in no way bound by the values of the past. Their ambition can only have been stimulated by Victoria's Proclamation of November 1858, in which it is expressly stated that We hold ourselves bound to the natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to our other subjects...it is our further will that... our subjects of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity, duly to discharge.

Acting on these sentiments, Lord Ripon, viceroy from 1880 to 1885, extended the powers of local self-government and sought to remove racial practices in the law courts by the Ilbert Bill. But a policy at once liberal and progressive at one turn was reactionary and backward at the next, creating new elites and confirming old attitudes. The Ilbert Bill only had the effect of causing a White mutiny, and the end of the prospect of perfect equality before the law. In 1886 measures were adopted to restrict Indian entry into the civil service.

6.1. Military reorganisation

The Bengal army dominated the Indian army before 1857 and a direct result after the rebellion was the scaling back of the size of the Bengali contingent in the army. The Brahmin presence in the Bengal Army was reduced in the late nineteenth century because of their perceived primary role as mutineers. The British looked for increased recruitment in the Punjab for the Bengal army as a result of the apparent discontent that resulted in the Sepoy conflict.
The rebellion transformed both the native and European armies of British India. Of the 74 regular Bengal Native Infantry regiments in existence at the beginning of 1857 only twelve escaped mutiny or disbandment. All ten of the Bengal Light Cavalry regiments were lost. The old Bengal Army had accordingly almost completely vanished from the order of battle. These troops were replaced by new units recruited from castes hitherto under-utilised by the British and from the minority so-called Martial Races, such as the Sikhs and the Gurkhas.

The inefficiencies of the old organisation, which had estranged sepoys from their British officers, were addressed, and the post-1857 units were mainly organised on the irregular system. Before the rebellion each Bengal Native Infantry regiment had 26 British officers, who held every position of authority down to the second-in-command of each company. In irregular units there were few European officers who associated themselves far more closely with their soldiers, while more responsibility was given to the Indian officers.

The British increased the ratio of British to Indian soldiers within India. From 1861 Indian artillery was replaced by British units, except for a few mountain batteries. The post-rebellion changes formed the basis of the military organisation of British India until the early 20th century.