

1857 : A Symbol of Composite Heritage

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Quite often discussions on Composite Heritage tend to focus more on monuments, culture, traditions and other abstract ideas and less on concrete political events. If we were to focus on the history of South Asia, the rebellion of 1857 stands out as a prime example of a composite struggle waged by a substantial section of the people of Indian subcontinent against the mightiest imperial power of the world in the 19th century. The rebellion was one of the most powerful resistance offered to any imperialist in any other part of the world in the 19th century. For the people of north India it represented an unprecedented example of Hindu-Muslim unity. The heights of Hindu-Muslim unity reached during the struggle of 1857 remained untouched in all the subsequent political events.

So why has the rebellion received so little attention as a symbol of Composite Heritage? Part of the explanation is that as a political event it failed. The rebellion was not successful in achieving the objectives for which it was fought. Failed projects are generally not invoked as symbols for positive, desirable values like those of Composite Heritage. But the tragedy of 1857 was that it failed twice over – historically and historiographically. The first failure was that of the event; the second, of the attempts to understand the reality of 1857. Both the failures are instructive for us and need to be understood.

Till the end of the 19th century, the British officials continued to look upon the rebellion primarily as a ‘sepoj mutiny’. The reasons for the mutiny were seen, not in any deep and pervasive discontent, but merely in the use of the newly arrived enfield greased cartridges that contained the meat of cows and pigs. Cow was considered sacred by Hindus; pig was considered impure by Muslims. The cartridge had to be bitten by the mouth before loading. This practice was resented by both Hindus and Muslim sepoys who ‘mutineed’ against their masters. This in short was the favourite British explanation for why the soldiers rebelled. Yet another British tendency was to look upon the event as a ‘Muslim’ reaction. Upon this view, British had taken over power from the Muslims who made the last consolidated effort to regain their lost power and glory through the revolt of 1857. Thus ‘sepoj mutiny’ and ‘Muslim reaction’ were the main components of the way in which the

British chose to understand the reality of 1857. Leading 19th century Muslim reformer and the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, tried to dispel the myth of the revolt being a Muslim conspiracy, in his book *Asbaab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind* (Causes of the Indian Rebellion). But by then the Muslim tag had come to be strongly glued to the rebellion and it appeared unlikely that the tag would be removed.

It was at the beginning of the 20th century that the rebellion was taken out of the Muslim domain and established firmly in the national domain. This was done by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who called the rebellion the first war of Indian independence, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the event. Quite ironically Savarkar was to later emerge as the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and lead a narrow and exclusivist Hindu communal movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

Savarkar’s was the first attempt to establish the rebellion as a nationalist event. A group of the Indian revolutionaries active in North America were also inspired by the event and named their party *Ghadar* (rebellion) party. But the attitude of the mainstream leadership of the Indian National Movement remained somewhat ambivalent towards the rebellion. On the one hand, the nationalist historians acknowledged the popular and radical character of the rebellion and saw its roots in the exploitative character of the British rule and the deep Indian discontent against it. But on the other hand, they saw the leadership of the rebellion in the hands of feudal elements and the princes. On the basis of the leadership of the rebellion they tended to characterise it as feudal and backward. It was indeed unfortunate that just as the ‘Muslim tag’ was removed, the ‘feudal tag’ was stuck to the rebellion. Jawaharlal Nehru praised the revolt for its popular character, militancy and fierce anti-imperialism in his famous book *Discovery of India*, he too looked upon it as the last serious effort by the old aristocratic and feudal elements to reestablish the old order. According to Nehru the leadership of the rebellion was in the hands of those people who had played out their historical innings and there was no role left for them in history. This was also the perspective of the dominant Marxian historians in India who considered the leadership of the rebellion

as a spent force.

This ambivalence continued to characterise the major historical writings on 1857. In spite of all its militancy and anti-imperialism, it was considered as revivalist and anti-modern. It was generally not seen as a forerunner to modern Indian nationalism. It was considered the last major traditional rebellion, not the first major modern rebellion. Its connections with the Indian National movement were not explored and it was readily assumed that these connections did not exist. At the same time leading historian R.C. Majumdar tried to retrieve and restore the Muslim

tag by considering the rebellion a mere Muslim reaction. Taking a dig at Savarkar's characterisation of the revolt as the first war of independence, Majumdar dismissed the rebellion as neither *first*, nor

a *war*, nor for *independence*. This was a paraphrasing of Voltair's description of the Holy Roman Empire as neither *Holy*, nor *Roman*, nor indeed an *Empire*. Majumdar saw 1857 as an attempt by the old ruling groups, displaced from power, to reclaim their lost power.

It was interestingly in 1957, the year of the hundredth anniversary of the event that some of these misgivings came to be questioned and demolished. New researches initiated on the occasion of the anniversary of the rebellion were able to establish it not just as popular and militant, but a prime example of a Composite Heritage of the people of the Indian subcontinent. It has now become clear that it was not just a sepoy revolt but a huge mass upheaval against British imperialism involving peasants, artisans and other poor sections of the population. Feudal and princely elements may have joined it, but there was nothing exclusively feudal about it. It was a civil rebellion, along with a military one. It was also not confined to North India. The new researches have established that large parts of the subcontinent (north, east, west and parts of south) had been engulfed by the fires of the rebellion. Moreover, the rebellion also stood out as a shining example of Hindu-Muslim unity. The spirit of

comraderie displayed by the Hindu and Muslim rebels was seldom seen before the revolt, or indeed after. Waging of common struggles, Muslim generals leading Hindu soldiers and vice-versa, banning of cow slaughter by Muslim rulers in their areas of control exemplified Hindu-Muslim solidarity in unprecedented ways.

And perhaps the most important point in the end. The rebellion may not have been entirely nationalist, but it contained some vital elements of modern Indian nationalism. In this sense 1857 should be remembered not just as the last major traditional

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resistance against British imperialism, but also as the precursor to the Indian National Movement fought under the leadership of Mahatma

Gandhi. The connections between the two need to be explored and brought out. One example from Allahabad city of North India should illustrate this connection. After 1857 the British had hanged many rebels by trees in their retaliatory violence. The people of Allahabad had identified many such trees symbolizing the courage of the rebels and the brutality of the British rulers. They also started worshipping these trees. This practice however discontinued after a few years. Then many years later and quite a distance away from Allahabad, the brutality of British imperialism was displayed in 1919 in Punjab, at Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar where hundreds of innocent people were gunned down in a cruel massacre. Responding to the Jallainwalla Bagh massacre, the people of Allahabad, without any mediation or instructions of political leaders, started worshipping the same trees which were associated with 1857 in their collective consciousness. Thus the people of the subcontinent had established the connection between 1857 and the national movement in their own innovative and spontaneous ways. It is therefore necessary for historians to recognise this connection and grant it historical legitimacy.

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