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## The 1857 Uprising: A Historical Study Through Social and Political Lenses

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### **Abstract:**

*This research paper focuses on the Uprising of 1857 by studying its political, social, and regional aspects. It explains that the revolt was not just a sudden military mutiny but the result of deeper problems created by British rule in India. Policies such as annexation of Indian states, heavy land revenue systems, and the removal of traditional rulers and landlords created anger among princes, taluqdars, sepoys, peasants, and other groups. These political and administrative changes disturbed existing power structures and increased dissatisfaction across different sections of society. (Chandra, 2003; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Bayly, 2004)*

*The paper also discusses the social roots of the uprising. Economic hardship, peasant exploitation, loss of land rights, and fears of interference in religious and cultural practices encouraged many ordinary people to join the revolt. Because of these wider grievances, the movement spread beyond the army and gained mass participation. (Stokes, 1980; Tandon, 1984). It further studies the revolt in different regions such as Awadh, Delhi, Bihar, Punjab, Bulandshahr, and Jhansi. In each area, local leaders and specific problems shaped the nature of resistance. In some places, rebels even tried to set up their own administration, showing that the revolt had political aims and organization. (Mukherjee, 1987; Husain, 1998)*

*Overall, the paper presents the Uprising of 1857 as a broad, multi-regional and multi-class resistance against colonial rule, which played an important role in the development of later anti-colonial movements in India. (Pati, 2007; Sen, 1988)*

**Keywords:** 1857 revolt, uprising of 1857, 1857 uprising through political and social lenses

### **Introduction:**

The Uprising of 1857 is an important event in India's history because it was the first large scale resistance against British rule. Early British writers called it a "Sepoy Mutiny" suggesting it was only a revolt by Indian soldiers working for the East India Company. But later research shows it was much more than that. The uprising involved soldiers, peasants, landlords, displaced rulers, and urban people, all reacting to changes brought by the British. Looking at it from social and political perspectives, the

revolt was not sudden. It grew from long-standing grievances and resistance to foreign rule (Chandra, 1987; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

The British gradually weakened India's traditional systems of power. Indian kings and nobles lost control over their territories as the East India Company expanded. Policies like the Doctrine of Lapse caused tension among rulers because if a king got died without a natural heir, the British could take over his kingdom. This made many rulers and nobles feel insecure and angry, creating dissatisfaction against the British. The annexation of Awadh in 1856 was a major cause of the revolt. The removal of the ruling dynasty affected thousands of soldiers, officials, and landowners who relied on the court for their livelihood. This created widespread anger. The uprising began on 10 May 1857 at Meerut and soon reached Delhi. (Mukherjee, 1987; Chandra, 2003; Singh, H., 1991).

At the same time, large sections of the population were experiencing serious hardships in their everyday lives. High land revenue demands placed heavy pressure on peasants, often forcing them into debt and leading to the loss of land. The introduction of new revenue systems disrupted traditional agrarian relations and weakened village communities. Artisans and craftsmen suffered due to the decline of indigenous industries and the growing dominance of British manufactured goods. These economic changes created anger and insecurity among both rural and urban groups. In regions such as Awadh and Bihar, peasants actively supported the rebels by supplying food, shelter, and manpower. Many people believed that the restoration of traditional rulers would bring relief from oppressive policies. Religious concerns also played an important role in strengthening unity among different groups. The widespread rumour that the cartridges of the Enfield rifle were greased with cow and pig fat deeply offended Hindu and Muslim soldiers alike. This confirmed fears that the British intended to interfere with religious practices, helping to turn dissatisfaction into open resistance (Stokes, 1980; Sen, 1988).

The revolt spread across north and central India, involving both soldiers and ordinary people. In Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar was declared emperor, making the city the symbolic centre of resistance. In Awadh (Lucknow), local leaders and former officials guided communities against British authority. Kanpur was led by Nana Saheb, Jhansi by Rani Lakshmibai, Bihar by Kunwar Singh, and Ballabgarh (Haryana) by Raja Nahar Singh (Mukherjee, 1987; Chandra, 2003; Singh, H., 1991).

Although there was no central leadership, these regional leaders mobilized peasants, artisans, and civilians, showing that the revolt had strong social roots. In Delhi and Awadh, brief rebel administrations issued proclamations appealing to justice, tradition, and religion, which helped gain popular support and made the uprising more than just a military mutiny (Mukherjee, 1987; Singh, G., 2009)

Historians have viewed the uprising differently over time. Early British writers described it as a violent, chaotic rebellion caused by disloyal soldiers. Nationalist historians called it the First War of

Independence, highlighting the bravery of those who fought. Recent historians take a balanced view, saying it was not a modern nationalist movement but more than a simple mutiny. It showed the combined effects of political disruption and widespread social discontent under British rule (Pati, 2007).

### **Political and Administrative Factors Behind the 1857 Uprising:**

The Revolt of 1857 was closely connected to the political and administrative system established by the British in India. From the mid nineteenth century, East India Company had transforming from a trading organization into a powerful political authority controlling vast territories. This change brought a new form of governance that was centralized, rigid, and largely alien to Indian political traditions. Indians increasingly felt that their own systems of rule, justice, and administration were being replaced by foreign institutions that neither understood nor respected local customs. The British administration excluded Indians from positions of authority and treated them as subjects rather than partners in governance. As a result, many experienced political exclusion and a loss of self-respect, gradually leading to widespread opposition to colonial authority (Chandra, 2003; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

One of the most important political causes of the uprising was the British policy of annexation. Through military conquest, diplomatic pressure, and administrative measures, the East India Company steadily destroyed the sovereignty of Indian states. The Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie, became a major symbol of colonial injustice. Under this policy, princely states were annexed if a ruler died without a natural male heir, even though adoption was a long established Indian tradition. This policy directly attacked Indian political customs and weakened the authority of traditional rulers. States example Jhansi, Satara, and Nagpur were annexed, leading to widespread anger among royal families, nobles, and soldiers who lost their positions and privileges. The annexation of Awadh in 1856 further intensified resentment, as it was justified on the grounds of maladministration despite Awadh's loyalty to the British. The removal of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah destroyed the political structure of the region and displaced thousands who depended on the court, turning Awadh into a major center of resistance during the revolt (Chandra, 2003; Bayly, 2004).

British administrative centralization also played a crucial role in creating dissatisfaction. Traditional systems of governance that allowed local elites to exercise authority were replaced by a uniform and centralized bureaucracy controlled by British officials. Zamindars, taluqdars, village headmen, and local chiefs lost their administrative powers, weakening long-established networks of loyalty and control. British officials often lacked understanding of Indian society and ruled with arrogance, enforcing laws without considering local conditions. Indians were almost completely excluded from higher administrative positions, reinforcing the racial divide between rulers and the ruled. This exclusion created a strong feeling that British rule was not only foreign but also oppressive and unjust, contributing significantly to the political climate that led to the rebellion (Alavi, 1995; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

The British judicial system further deepened political resentment. The introduction of new courts, legal procedures, and laws disrupted traditional methods of justice that were based on local customs and community practices. The colonial legal system was complex, costly, and conducted in unfamiliar languages, making it difficult for ordinary Indians to access justice. British judges often showed racial bias, which increased the sense of injustice among Indians. Traditional authorities such as village elders and local leaders lost their judicial roles, leading to the decline in their social and political influence. As a result, the courts came to be seen not as instruments of justice but as tools of colonial domination, increasing hostility toward British administration (Stokes, 1980; Alavi, 1995). Revenue administration was another major source of political dissatisfaction. British land revenue policies focused heavily on maximizing income, often at the cost of political stability. In regions like Awadh, the removal of taluqdars and the restructuring of land ownership destroyed traditional systems of authority and governance. These policies made weak relationship between rulers and peasants, creating widespread resentment. Although revenue policies had serious economic consequences, their political impact was equally important, as they alienated powerful rural elites who later played a leading role in mobilizing resistance against British rule. The revolt in many areas was led by dispossessed landlords and chiefs who sought to restore their lost authority (Mukherjee, 1987; Stokes, 1980).

The organization of the East India Company's army also reflected political and administrative discrimination. Indian sepoys formed majority of the Company's military forces but they were treated as inferior to British soldiers. They faced discrimination in different things such as pay, promotion, and privileges, and were denied opportunities to rise to higher ranks. Administrative decisions such as overseas deployment violated religious and social norms, further increasing dissatisfaction. These grievances created deep resentment within the army, which finally erupted at Meerut in May 1857. However, the sepoy revolt quickly merged with civilian resistance, showing that military discontent was closely connected to wider political anger against colonial rule (David, 2002; Ranjit, 1991).

The symbolic challenge to British authority during the revolt highlights its political character. Although the Mughal emperor had little real power by 1857, he remained a powerful symbol of legitimate rule in the eyes of many Indians. The rebels' decision to proclaim Bahadur Shah Zafar as the leader of the uprising represented a rejection of British sovereignty and an attempt to revive indigenous political authority. Rebel administrations and proclamations criticized British rule for destroying traditional governance, religion, and justice while promising to restore earlier systems of rule. These actions show that the uprising was not simply an act of violence but a politically conscious effort to replace colonial authority with familiar forms of governance (Chandra, 2003; Bayly, 2004).

Regional experiences of the revolt further underline the importance of political and administrative factors. In areas like Awadh and Bihar, resistance was shaped by local grievances

against British officials and policies. In Punjab, the relative absence of large-scale rebellion was due to British success in maintaining alliances with local elites, demonstrating that political loyalty played a decisive role in determining participation in the revolt. These regional differences suggest that the spread and intensity of the uprising depended largely on how the British administrative policies affected power which we existed in the structure. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Bayly, 2004).

By 1857, decades of political exclusion, administrative centralization, and destruction of indigenous authority had created a situation in which large sections of Indian society felt alienated from colonial rule. The revolt emerged as a collective response to this long history of political injustice and administrative domination, bringing together dispossessed rulers, dissatisfied soldiers, rural elites, and ordinary people under a shared opposition to British authority.

### **Social Roots of the 1857 Uprising and Mass Participation:**

The Revolt of 1857 emerged from deep social tensions created by British colonial rule rather than being a sudden or isolated military mutiny. By the mid of the nineteenth century, colonial policies had penetrated almost every sphere of Indian life, disrupting long-standing social, economic, and cultural structures. The British introduced new administrative systems, legal codes, revenue policies, and educational reforms that weakened traditional authorities and created widespread insecurity. These changes affected peasants, landlords, artisans, religious leaders, and soldiers alike. The revolt gained its mass character because it expressed collective social anger against colonial intrusion and the destruction of customary ways of life. As Bipan Chandra notes, the uprising reflected the accumulated resentment of different social groups who felt threatened by the colonial state and its policies (Chandra, 2003).

Agrarian distress formed one of the most important social foundations of the uprising. British land revenue settlements such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari were designed primarily to maximize revenue collection, often ignoring the realities of rural society. High revenue demands, rigid collection methods, and the use of law courts and moneylenders led to widespread peasant indebtedness and land alienation. At the same time, many traditional zamindars, talukdars, and chiefs lost their privileges, judicial powers, and social status under British rule. In regions like Awadh, the annexation of territory and the removal of taluqdars caused deep resentment among both elites and peasants. This shared sense of dispossession created strong social unity against the British and turned rural society into a major support base for the rebellion (Mukherjee, 1987; Stokes, 1980).

The destruction of traditional crafts and artisanal livelihoods further intensified popular discontent. British economic policies promoted free trade and the import of cheap machine-made goods from Britain, which severely damaged Indian handicraft industries. Weavers, metalworkers, potters, and other artisans lost their markets and sources of income. Since artisanal occupations were closely tied to caste and social identity, economic decline also resulted in social humiliation and loss

of status. Many artisans migrated to towns or became dependent on irregular work, deepening their sense of insecurity. At the time of revolt, these groups actively supported rebel forces by providing supplies, shelter, and local intelligence, especially in urban centers such as Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow. Their participation highlights the social depth of the uprising beyond rural areas (Bayly, 2004).

Religious and cultural anxieties also played a crucial role in shaping the social roots of the revolt. British interference in social and religious practices created widespread suspicion that colonial rule aimed to destroy Indian religions such as abolishing sati, legalizing widow remarriage, and promoting Western education were perceived by conservative sections as attacks on traditional values. The visible support given to Christian missionaries by the colonial state further reinforced fears of religious conversion. These anxieties were shared by the both Hindus and Muslims, creating a rare sense of unity between the two communities. Religious symbols, proclamations, and appeals were used to mobilize people, presenting resistance as a defense of faith, honor, and tradition against foreign rule (Bayly, 2004; Singh, 2009).

The sepoys acted as a vital link between popular grievances and organized rebellion. Most Indian soldiers came from peasant backgrounds and maintained close connections with their villages. They were affected not only by military issues such as low pay, limited promotion opportunities, and racial discrimination but also by broader social concerns. The introduction of the Enfield rifle cartridges, believed to be greased with cow and pig fat, symbolized the threat to religious purity and caste identity. When the sepoys rebelled, their actions resonated strongly with civilian populations who shared similar fears and grievances. As a result, the uprising quickly spread from military cantonments to towns and villages, drawing in large sections of society (Chandra, 2003; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

The participation of women, local rulers, and religious leaders further expanded the social base of the revolt. Some major figures such as Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh became symbols of resistance and inspired mass support. Religious leaders, including Hindu ascetics and Muslim clerics, legitimized rebellion through sermons and proclamations, encouraging people to join the struggle. Rebel administrations in places like Delhi and Awadh attempted to revive older systems of governance, appealing to popular memories of pre-colonial rule. Villages collectively contributed food, shelter, and manpower, showing that participation in the revolt was embedded in everyday social relations rather than being imposed from above (Husain, 1998; Deshpande, 2008).

The nature and intensity of popular participation varied across regions depending on local social conditions. In Awadh, the revolt was driven by displaced taluqdars and aggrieved peasants; in Bihar, local chiefs and rural communities played a prominent role; in Central India, resistance was shaped by opposition to British interference in princely authority. Urban participation was particularly strong in old Mughal centers, where artisans and traders supported rebel regimes. Despite these

regional variations, the revolt expressed a common desire to protect social status, economic security, and cultural autonomy. The uprising therefore represented a broad social reaction to colonial domination rather than a unified nationalist movement in the modern sense (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Pati, 2007).

### **The Uprising across Regions, Leadership and Centres of Resistance:**

The uprising of 1857 emerged as a multi-layered and regionally diverse challenge to British colonial authority, characterized by a combination of elite leadership and popular participation rather than a centrally coordinated national revolt. While the immediate spark was provided by the sepoy mutiny at Meerut, the rapid spread of unrest across North and Central India revealed long-standing grievances rooted in political dispossession, economic exploitation, and social disruption. British annexations, interference with traditional governance structures, and the erosion of customary land rights had created widespread resentment among rulers, soldiers, peasants, and urban artisans. These conditions led to region-specific patterns of resistance, with some areas witnessing large-scale participation of peasants alongside traditional elites, while in other regions the revolt remained primarily led by local rulers and zamindars. The uprising was thus a combination of military revolt, social protest, and political assertion that reflected the uneven impact of the colonial rule across the subcontinent (Chandra, 2003; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

Awadh was one of the most prominent and enduring centres of rebellion, primarily because the annexation of the state in 1856 had dismantled its traditional political and social hierarchy. The removal of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and the undermining of the taluqdari system created widespread discontent among both elites and peasants. When rebellion erupted, taluqdars assumed leadership roles, organizing armed resistance and mobilizing rural populations to attack revenue offices, courts, and symbols of colonial authority. Lucknow, the former capital of Awadh, became the epicentre of the revolt, witnessing fierce confrontations between British forces and rebel armies. Begum Hazrat Mahal, acting as a leader in the absence of the deposed Nawab, coordinated defence strategies, mobilized fighters, and maintained administrative structures in rebel-controlled areas. The combination of elite leadership and peasant support in Awadh illustrates how political dispossession and economic grievances converged to create one of the strongest and most sustained centres of resistance during the uprising (Mukherjee, 1987; Stokes, 1980; Husain, 1998).

Delhi emerged as a symbolic and organizational heart of the uprising. The rebels' decision to proclaim Bahadur Shah Zafar as the Mughal emperor represented an effort to provide legitimacy and unify diverse rebel groups from surrounding regions. While the emperor had little real authority, his presence served as a rallying point and allowed rebels to establish alternative administrative arrangements, issue proclamations, and revive pre-colonial governance practices. Delhi attracted rebel sepoys, local rulers, and civilian participants, creating a centre of resistance that combined political

symbolism with military engagement. The temporary administration in Delhi highlights how the rebels sought to project moral and political legitimacy while attempting to coordinate disparate regional uprisings, although limited resources and lack of centralized military command eventually led to the city's recapture by British forces (Chandra, 1987; Husain, 1998).

Kanpur (Cawnpore) in the Doab region of the Ganges was another crucial site of rebellion. Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the deposed Peshwa Baji Rao II, mobilized sepoys and local supporters to mount a strong resistance against British authority. The siege of the British garrison and the subsequent massacre of British residents, including women and children, became notorious and underscored the intensity of anti-British sentiment. Kanpur exemplifies the role of traditional elites using their inherited prestige and historical grievances to organize large-scale resistance. The revolt here combined military confrontation with efforts to establish temporary governance, demonstrating the rebels' ambition to challenge colonial control at both strategic and administrative levels (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Chandra, 2003).

In Central India, Bundelkhand and Jhansi became pivotal centres of resistance, primarily because of the annexation of Jhansi under the Doctrine of Lapse. Rani Lakshmibai emerged as a remarkable leader who combined dynastic legitimacy with military prowess, mobilizing both soldiers and local peasant forces to defend Jhansi against British attacks. She led sustained military campaigns across Bundelkhand, inspiring widespread participation and demonstrating how princely dispossession could catalyze armed resistance. Other local rulers in Central India, including leaders in Orchha and Datia, also joined the rebellion, seeking to reclaim authority eroded by British expansion. This pattern of regional resistance underscores the importance of dynastic and elite leadership in organizing the revolt, particularly in areas where peasant mobilization was secondary to political grievances (Deshpande, 2008; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

Bihar displayed a somewhat different form of resistance, where leadership was concentrated in the hands of influential zamindars rather than broadly across the peasantry. Leaders like Kunwar Singh drew upon personal prestige, kinship networks, and opposition to colonial revenue policies to mobilize local support. Although peasant participation was more limited, the uprising in Bihar demonstrates the significance of traditional authority structures in organizing resistance and sustaining rebellion in regions under long-term colonial control. This regional variation reflects the complex interplay between elite interests and social grievances in determining the intensity and character of the revolt (Jaiswal, 2004; Chandra, 2003).

Bareilly, in Rohilkhand, emerged as another significant centre under the leadership of Khan Bahadur Khan Rohilla. The rebels captured the town and briefly established a form of self-governance, illustrating the ability of local political elites to temporarily replace colonial authority. The revolt in Rohilkhand also highlights the importance of Muslim leadership and communal networks in organizing

resistance, emphasizing that the uprising was multi-religious and drew on diverse social groups. Similarly, several smaller towns in the Doab and Ganga– Yamuna regions came under temporary rebel control, demonstrating that while the uprising was locally rooted, it remained interconnected in character (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

Throughout the uprising, leadership was concentrated among traditional elites such as princes, taluqdars, zamindars, and chiefs, whose authority had been eroded by colonial policies. While these elites provided structure, legitimacy, and military organization, they also constrained the revolutionary potential of the revolt, as most leaders aimed to restore pre-colonial political arrangements rather than effecting social transformation. Peasants, although active in some regions, were generally mobilized under elite coordination, demonstrating the combined elite and popular character of the rebellion. In areas such as Punjab, widespread rebellion failed to materialize largely because British officials secured the support of Sikh elites, underscoring how regional political alliances shaped whether resistance emerged (Bayly, 2004; Stokes, 1980; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

Cultural and symbolic elements were integral to the uprising, particularly in the form of proclamations, religious appeals, and references to traditional legitimacy. Rebel proclamations in Delhi, Awadh, and Bareilly invoked moral and religious authority to mobilize local populations and unite participants across social and religious divides. These symbolic strategies were crucial in sustaining morale, legitimizing rebellion, and fostering solidarity among diverse participants. While elite leadership shaped the organization of the revolt, these cultural and social dimensions enabled the rebellion to extend beyond narrow military objectives and engage broader social groups (Sen, 1988; Mukherjee, 1987).

The widespread unrest across regions such as Awadh, Delhi, Kanpur, Jhansi, Bihar, and Bareilly demonstrate the heterogeneous yet interconnected nature of the 1857 uprising. Each centre of resistance was shaped by local grievances, leadership structures, and socio-political contexts, combining elite ambitions with mass discontent. The diversity of participation from princely rulers to taluqdars, sepoys, and peasants highlights the multi-layered character of the revolt. Despite its eventual suppression, the uprising reflected the vulnerabilities of colonial authority, exposed the widespread dissatisfaction with British rule, and became a foundational moment in the collective political consciousness of India (Chandra, 2003; Bayly, 2004; Mukherjee, 1987).

### **Conclusion:**

The Uprising of 1857 emerges as a historically significant event shaped by intertwined political grievances, administrative disruptions, social tensions, and regional dynamics rather than a sudden or isolated military outbreak. Policies of annexation, revenue extraction, and the weakening of traditional authority structures created deep dissatisfaction among rulers, taluqdars, soldiers, peasants, and artisans, forming the political background against which the revolt took shape. These conditions reveal

that resistance to colonial rule had been steadily building across different layers of society before finally erupting into open rebellion. (Chandra, 2003; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Bayly, 2004)

The social character of the uprising further demonstrates that it drew strength from agrarian distress, economic hardship, cultural anxieties, and the active participation of diverse social groups. The involvement of peasants, dispossessed landed elites, artisans, and local communities indicates that the revolt extended beyond sepoy discontent and reflected broader societal unrest. Such participation gave the uprising a mass dimension that connected military action with popular resistance. (Stokes, 1980; Tandon, 1984; Singh, 2009)

Regional studies show that the revolt did not follow a uniform pattern but was shaped by local grievances, leadership, and circumstances in areas like Awadh, Delhi, Bihar, Punjab, Bulandshahr, and Jhansi. In several places, rebels attempted to establish alternative administrative arrangements, demonstrating political intent and organized resistance rather than mere disorder. These variations highlight the complexity and diversity of the movement across different parts of India. (Mukherjee, 1987; Husain, 1998; Jaiswal, 2004; Gupta, 1988)

Historiographical reassessments underline the need to move beyond older conspiracy theories and narrow interpretations by incorporating regional evidence, cultural memory, and social perspectives. Such approaches present 1857 as a layered historical phenomenon with multiple meanings and experiences. (Pati, 2007; Sen, 1988)

Taken together, the political, social, regional, and historiographical perspectives establish the Uprising of 1857 as a broad, multi-class, and multi-regional challenge to colonial authority. It stands as an early and powerful expression of collective resistance that laid important foundations for later phases of the Indian national movement. (Chandra, 2003; Bayly, 2004)

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