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THE INDIAN REBELLION OF 1857

By C. Claire Summers

India in the mid-1800s was Britain's prized possession, called the "Crown Jewel" of Queen Victoria's holdings. The logistics of its administration, however, were carried out not by the home government but by the designated agency of the Empire: the British East India Company. Often referred to simply as The Company, this entity had been a presence in India since the Mughal Emperor Jahangir granted the English a trading base near Bombay in 1613, during the reign of James I.[1] The Company eventually grew to become the chief military and governing power in India in 1784, augmented by troops from the Queen's Regiments. The armies of The Company consisted primarily of local infantrymen known as sepoys, and by 1856 the ratio of British soldiers to sepoys in the army was one to six or more.[2] This staggering numerical difference between the British and Indian soldiers combined with religious strife among the ranks of the sepoys led to a large-scale revolution against the British in 1857. This revolt, known commonly as the Indian Rebellion or Sepoy Mutiny, had a significant impact on both the collective British spirit and the logistical administration of the Empire.

In 1707, after the death of Aurangzeb, the last powerful Mughal Emperor, The Company began militarily expanding its influence in India; expanding, in fact, to the extent that Parliament felt the need to pass several regulations placing The Company almost entirely in the hands of the British government.[3] Even so, The Company still controlled the affairs in India with only minimal Parliamentary involvement. Christopher Hibbert described the new role of The Company in his book *The Great Mutiny*:

> [The Company] became the agent of the British Government in India. Gone were the days when its ill-paid employees made vast fortunes by trading on their own account: they were now officials of a centralized bureaucracy whose reputation for integrity became widely respected.[4]

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[1] Christopher Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India 1857* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 17.

[2] Ibid., 19.

[3] Hibbert, 18.

[4] Hibbert, 18.

These new rules made them responsible for overseeing the civil affairs of their territories as well as the sepoy armies. The Company did this largely through control of the Indian authorities. F.W. Buckler said of this system, "The source of the Company's power in India lay, not in the Charters of the King of England, nor in the Acts of the British Parliament, nor in the sword, but in the *farmāns* [edicts] of the Mughal Emperor."[5] Through pervasive government regulation and cultural influence, the reach of the British in India continued to spread.

A growing restiveness among the Indian citizens accompanied the increase in British power. Governmental land reforms affected rich and poor alike, depriving many Indians of their property. If the British had anticipated a willing acceptance of their new laws, they were mistaken. Hibbert recorded the feelings of the Indian peasants:

> They preferred their own old ways to the strange ones being imposed upon them by the foreigners… They did not understand the new rules and regulations; they did not trust the new law courts whose native officials were notoriously corrupt and whose procedure was quite incomprehensible; they would much rather have been governed by their former native masters, unpredictable and violent though they sometimes were.[6]

Conflict brewed within the ranks of the armies as well. Large factions of both Muslim and Hindu troops comprised the forces, creating a breeding ground for religious conflict. The sepoys' respective religious beliefs frequently sparked concern that the British were attempting to subvert their faith; for example, Hindu troops would often refuse certain orders for fear that they would undermine the caste system.[7] Both groups felt that they were not receiving due consideration from the British leaders, and this sentiment helped stoke the fires of rebellion.

The catalyst for the uprising was a direct result of this religious conflict, specifically stemming from dietary prohibitions. Early in 1857, a rumor began circulating through the ranks of the sepoys stationed in Meerut

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[5] F. W. Buckler, "The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1922): 74.

[6] Hibbert, 49.

[7] Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 69.

that the cartridges for the newly distributed Enfield rifles had been greased with pig and cow fat.[8] The soldiers were required not only to handle the cartridges, but also to bite off the ends before loading the rifles. Hindus believed cows were sacred, and Muslims considered pigs unclean and therefore forbidden from consumption. Charles Creighton Hazewell, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1857, described the impression this made on the soldiers. He said that the sepoys became afraid the use of the cartridge grease was a plot designed to make them religiously unclean, destabilize the caste system and otherwise begin a process of forced conversion to Christianity. As Hazewell observed, "The consequences of loss of caste are so feared… that upon this point the sensitiveness of the Sepoy is always extreme, and his suspicions easily aroused."[9] The cartridge incident initiated a wave of insurrection amid the ranks of The Company's armies that continued to build throughout early 1857, coming to a head in May that same year.

Elisa Greathed, a British woman living in Meerut with her husband at the time of the incident, recorded her experiences on May 10, 1857, the day the rebellion began in earnest. After hearing a commotion in the distance and being warned of danger by British officers, Mrs. Greathed and her husband took shelter on the rooftop of their house. The sepoys set their home ablaze during their march through the city, and they only managed to survive with the help of their loyal servants. She described the aftermath of the rebellion:

> Never was dawn more welcome to us than on the 11th of May; the daylight showed how complete the work of destruction had been. All was turned into ruin and desolation, and our once bright happy home was now a blackened pile. Sad was the scene; but thankfulness for life left no place for other regrets…We had been utterly cut off from all communication through the night, and sad was the tale of murder and bloodshed we now heard, and… it was found that the telegraph wires had been destroyed by the Sepoys, before any knowledge of what was occurring had transpired. The mutineers got away during the night, and

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[8] Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 89.

[9] Charles Creighton Hazewell, "The Indian Revolt," *The Atlantic Monthly,* December 1857 (*The Atlantic* online database:
http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/1857dec/revolt.htm).

pursuit was useless.[10]

The story of the Meerut episode, told from Mrs. Greathed's point of view, shows how quickly the violence escalated after it began. The rebellion spread from Meerut, throwing many of the British Indian holdings into chaos.

Revolts broke out in several other locations on the subcontinent, most significantly at Cawnpore, Lucknow, and Delhi.[11] British troops struggled against the sepoy forces, which generally outnumbered them.[12] On the whole, the rebellion was relatively fractured. The sepoys had no unified command structure, and many of them retained their loyalty to the British; only a minority of the troops mutinied.[13] In addition to the rebels' lack of leadership, they had no cohesive plan of action. Laborious British victories at Delhi and Lucknow served as the turning point of the rebellion, and following those the fighting descended into sporadic guerilla warfare and soon ceased altogether.[14]

The fact that the 1857 incident held such significance for the British may seem something of a mystery, especially when examining the event in the larger context of nineteenth-century warfare. Christopher Herbert observed that, in actuality, the British were not politically or militarily weakened by the confrontation. They were able to tighten their imperial hold on India and amend their management to make it more efficient.[15] In fact, compared to the other European wars of the nineteenth century the Indian Rebellion was of small consequence. Only about 2,000 British soldiers were killed in action during the course of the mutiny, compared to 16-25,000 in the Napoleonic Wars.[16] Denis Judd observed that "in real terms, British supremacy was not seriously threatened,"[17] and Herbert calls it a "lurid

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[10] Elisa Greathed, "An Account of the Opening of the Indian Mutiny at Meerut, 1857," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Modern*. Accessed 21 March 2014.

[11] Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and the Victorian Trauma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

[12] The general statistics indicate that the sepoy soldiers in the British armies in 1857 outnumbered the British six to one (Hibbert 19), and although figures for the rebellions in individual cities varied somewhat the British would have been similarly outnumbered in most cases.

[13] Judd, 72.

[14] Herbert, 5.

[15] Ibid., 2.

[16] Matthew White, "Statistics of Wars, Oppressions and Atrocities of the Nineteenth Century, http://necrometrics.com/wars19c.htm (accessed April 2, 2015).

[17] Judd, 73.

footnote to the tale of nineteenth-century imperialism."[18] If this was the case, it seems odd that the conflict was so injurious to the collective British consciousness.

Primarily, the rebellion infuriated the British both at home and abroad. Both sides committed atrocities, but the propaganda in the English homeland elicited a violent outcry against the sepoys. Papers published excerpts like this one in the *Atlantic Monthly*, quoting an unnamed "officer of great distinction":

> Three regiments left their lines, fell upon every European, man, woman, or child, they met or could find, murdered them all…and, after working such a night of mischief and horror as devils might have delighted in, marched off to Delhi en masse…The horrors of Meerut were repeated in the imperial city, and every European who could be found was massacred with revolting barbarity. In fact, the spirit was that of a servile war. Annihilation of the ruling race was felt to be the only chance of safety or impunity; so no one of the ruling race was spared.[19]

Newspapers printed accounts like this as they received them from India, keeping the British people updated on events and appalled by the media's descriptions of the acts of the sepoys. Some of the primary vessels for stirring up these sentiments were political cartoons. The cartoons relating to the rebellion emphasized racial differences and styled Britain as the keeper of peace and justice in India (see Fig. 1 & 2). Portrayal of the rebellion in the media successfully instilled fear of the Indians in the minds of the British people, as well as reinforcing the idea that the "Mahometans" (Muslims) and "Hindoos" were savage and in great need of the "enlightened and beneficent rule" of Britain.[20]

Likely the greatest blow to British pride was the underlying atmosphere of betrayal surrounding the rebellion, which led the public and the press to refer to the incident primarily as the "Indian Mutiny" or the "Sepoy Mutiny."[21] Britain had spent copious time and resources bringing much of India under one rule and "civilizing" it, and the people who were dedicated to the concept of a benevolent imperialism were appalled that the

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[18] Herbert, 2.
[19] Hazewell, "Indian Revolt."
[20] Hazewell.
[21] Judd, 67.

Indians would reject their improved administration. The press initiated an extremely successful push to redefine the incident as the mutiny of a few disgruntled sepoys rather than a dangerous threat to the Empire itself, which is how many had begun to view the situation.[22] Though reports had initially been hyperbolized, the revisionist campaign took the view to the opposite extreme, greatly downplaying the significance of the event.[23] The British populace wanted to know that their domains were still secure and to rest assured that their lives would not drastically change as a result of this event. Empire had become an inextricable piece of the British identity, from the monarchs to the lowest classes, and holding the empire together was crucial in the minds of the Victorians. The concept of a people challenging this goal by betraying their mother country was both shocking and offensive.

Among the more tangible results of the rebellion were the reorganization of the British government in India and the diminished power of the East India Company.[24] Parliament passed the Government of India Act in 1858, instituting a Minister of the Crown and a governing Council in India designed to handle affairs more smoothly.[25] This placed the administration of India in the hands of the government, as opposed to The Company. Parliament also created the position of Secretary of State for India, striving for stronger ties between the home government and the one overseas. Eventually Queen Victoria was declared "Empress of India," ostensibly to remind the local princes that they were part of the British hierarchy.[26] Although The Company still existed and traded, its power in India in all practical respects was lost. As Judd observes, "Ironically, although perhaps inevitably, the East India Company was the main casualty of the uprising."[27] The new British officials promptly initiated a reorganization of the army. They brought in more British soldiers to balance the ratio and attempted to avoid religious radicals like the Muslims and Hindus who had initiated the rebellion, preferring Sikhs or men from smaller tribes.[28] All in all, as a result of the rebellion the arm of the British in India was actually fortified rather than undermined.

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[22] Judd, 68.
[23] Hibbert, 391.
[24] Angus Hawkins, "British Parliamentary Party Alignment and the Indian Issue, 1857-1858," *Journal of British Studies* 23 (Spring 1984): 86.
[25] Hawkins, 105.
[26] Judd, 81.
[27] Judd, 74.
[28] Ibid., 75.

Though British popular opinions on the "mutiny" of 1857 varied and shifted, there can be no doubt as to the reality of its influence on the populace of the mother country. Although initially somewhat perplexing considering the limited casualty figures, it is clear that the effects of the rebellion were largely psychological and administrative rather than military. Precipitating the end of the East India Company's great power and the full incorporation of India into the British government, the rebellion sparked conversations about India from Parliament to the back streets of London. Outrage at the audacity of the sepoy rebels, the drive to preserve the empire, the spirit of goodwill created by the idea of the civilizing influence of the English—all of these feelings played into the British mentality that formed as a result of the rebellion. The administrative reforms instituted by the British government in India were substantial, and had a profound effect on the development of India in the following years. Despite its seemingly minor role in the larger context of British imperialism, the Rebellion of 1857 had a significant influence on both British and Indian culture that helped shape the mindset of both peoples.

Figure 1. "Justice," political cartoon, *Punch* magazine, 12 Sept. 1857, 109.
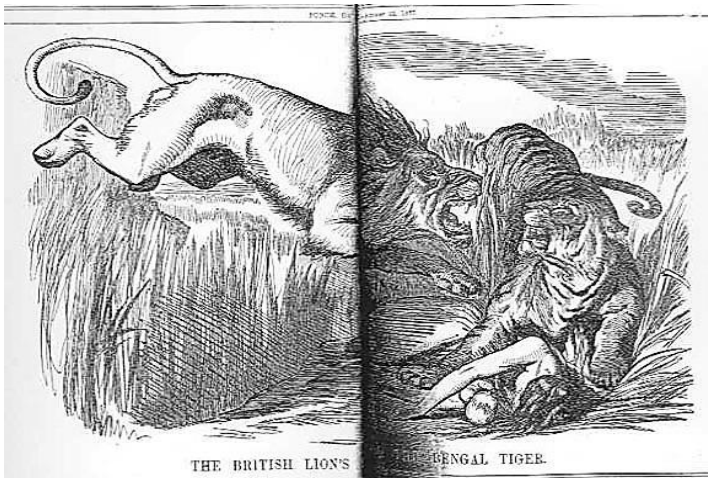

Figure 2. "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger," political cartoon, *Punch* magazine, 22 August 1857, 76-77.