

**BUREAU OF PARLIAMENTARY STUDIES
AND TRAINING**

LECTURE SERIES FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Proceedings

Subject : **Perspectives on the 1857 Uprising**

Lecture by : **Prof. Irfan Habib,
Professor of History (Retd.)
Aligarh Muslim University**

Date : **9th May 2007**

Time : **0900 hours**

Venue : **BPST Committee Hall,
First Floor, PLB,
New Delhi**

PROF. IRFAN HABIB: Mr. Speaker, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Secretary-General of Lok Sabha, distinguished Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very grateful to the very kind words that the hon. Speaker has expressed for me. That makes my task even more difficult because you will see – as I proceed – that I perhaps do not measure up to his assessment.

But in any case, I shall try my best to present to you certain points about the rebellion of 1857, about which as representatives of the people perhaps, you would be more interested, than other citizens. I think, as representatives of people, as Members of Parliament, you would be more interested in this than other citizens of India.

(b/ru)

First of all, I would like to attempt to set the revolt of 1857 in the larger context of colonial rule. There are a large number of people including those amongst the historians who now believe that criticisms of colonial rule in our textbooks and history have been overdone. Two or three years ago, in the NCERT textbooks, this point was made by many historians. But I think we cannot understand the revolt of 1857 and its character unless we look at what colonialism meant to India and indeed partly to the world and how India was involved and particularly the sepoys of the Indian Army were involved in this colonial rule.

First of all, colonialism involved constant draining of India's resources which fact is practically missing in the high school textbooks that are now prescribed by NCERT for children. This was a fact of life. Three or four per cent of the national income looks small but actually the savings of British during industrial revolution amounted to only 6 per cent. You can see what devastating drain it was year after year. In 1854 to 1855, just two years before the mutiny, the drain has been estimated on the basis of excess of exports over imports by Indian customs records and it was at Rs. 5.8 crores. It was an enormous amount at that time. This drain meant that Indian people would be subjected to increasing excessive taxation and that increase in taxation in which tax settlements of the British regime came to be organized fell most heavily on what was called the Mahalwari areas. They could not fall so heavily on permanent settlements on Rathwari system of Madras Presidency where they were fixed. But they felt that they were invariably in the Mahalwari system. In real terms, between 1819 and 1856, taxation in Mahalwari areas

which means UP and parts of Central India like Haryana, increased by 70 per cent. In most districts between 1839 and 1858, land changed hands upto 50 per cent. That is to say, land problem and taxation problems for peasants and zamindars were becoming extremely critical. We must remember that this area was the heart of the rebellion. This was the area from where the Bengal sepoys came and it was said that they were Hindustani peasants in uniform. These peasants belong to the family of small land owners to which I will come to later.

The second development was what was called imperialism or free trade. English industrial manufacturers, after the Charter Act of 1833, entered India practically free of duty. This meant that Indians particularly spinners and weavers were thrown out of employment to a high degree. Karl Marx pointed it out and he described it as the destruction of human race as far as Indian weavers are concerned. More than a quarter of the total textile consumption of India was now met by imports from Britain and India was the mother of cotton and so, one can understand how our urban population particularly spinners and weavers were affected. We must remember this point and we would later on note how the English writers described the weavers as the most fanatical civilians who took part in the rebellion of 1857.

Thirdly, there was imperialism of free trade and the policy of annexation between 1843 and 1856 in which parts of India were annexed in order to extend the umbrella of free trade. Punjab, Satara, Nagpur and Ranchi were annexed between 1843 and 1856. Almost one-fifths of the territory of India was added to the British rule during these years. Each annexation resulted in huge unemployment as people employed by the older regimes were thrown out of jobs. Dependants of families and artisans were thrown out of job. For instance, Lucknow at that time had a population of over 650,000 in 1856. It was said about the situation after annexation which took place just one year before the rebellion in 1856. An English man who was there at that time, at the outbreak of mutiny at Lucknow, said that the people of Lucknow should rise against the British and that it was a probable event. We have done very little to deserve their love and merit and then he went on to say how people were thrown out of employment and how the ordinary people were being overtaxed by the British Government. Annexation brought further distress to ordinary population and finally, imperialism of free trade demanded its price in

blood and this point was often overlooked. The Bengal Army which had 135,000 Indian soldiers was trained in all modern methods of warfare and it formed the largest modern Army in Asia. It was the main Army of British imperialism at that time. It had brought the brunt of wars of aggression in India and the world from 1839 onwards.

The first war in which thousands died was in Afghanistan. Sanguinely war against Gwalior in 1843 has been forgotten. There were two bloody wars in Punjab, Burma and Bengal sepoys were sent to Kenya and Russia to fight for France and England. Then, it was there in China to fight the opium war for England from 1840 onwards to 1857 when the revolt took place and then they were sent to Iran in 1856.

(c/0925/rbn)

No end to the participation in this war was in sight. Now, it was the Bengal Army which revolted. Therefore, in a sense, all the tensions that imperialism or colonialism was generating came to be concentrated in a dramatic form in the very instrument which British colonialism had forged. In order to have soldiers who spoke the same language the Bengal Army *sipahis* were recruited only from Hindustani speaking areas. It was called Telengi Army or Coorgi Army. It was called Telengi Army because the original corps had been constituted by people from Andhra Pradesh. In that, since they wanted literate people, they concentrated on Brahmins. This also reminds us that it was a literate army. It had nothing to do with the old world of Nawabs, princess and brings Zaminds and Talukdars. That is extremely important. It certainly revolted on the immediate issue of greased cartridges, and therefore, on the issue of Dheen or Dharm, that is religion. It was not a theocratic army. *Sipahis* were just religious like any other person. They were caste conscious. After 1850, it was decided that because there were so many Brahmins, no low caste people would be recruited to the Bengal Army. So, there was certain caste conscious. Otherwise, they were familiar with modern methods of organization and modern methods of military leadership and had no connection with the feudal class. The very important thing in the Bengal Army was that the Hindus and Muslims were put together. Syed Ahmed Khan in his "Causes of the Indian Rebellion" criticizes the English for having been so unwise as to put the Hindus and Muslims in the same battalions and regiments. He says: "When they went out to battle, the blood of both mingled and the Hindu was dependent on the support of Muslim and the Muslim was

dependent on the support of Hindu.” So, they became brothers. They had feelings of brotherhood more than actual brothers. “This was wrong”, he said. If Muslims and Hindus had been in separate regiments, if the Muslims had revolted, the British could have used Hindus against Muslims and vice-versa. This was the advice given after the event. The fact was that as their blood mingled together, the Hindu and Muslim *sipahis* forgot that they belong to different religions. When the issue of greased cartridges came, there were many occasions where the Muslim *sipahis* said that as long as our Hindu brothers won't accept these cartridges, we also won't accept them. Later on, the *sipahis* began to elect their officers. It is astonishing that overwhelmingly Hindu contingents elected Muslim officers and overwhelmingly Muslim contingents elected Hindu officers. This was done not consciously. That is what makes this particularly wonderful. I want to particularly emphasise the role of the *sipahis* because somehow we do not like the word “mutiny”, we extend this dislike to the role of Bengal Army *sipahis*. They were the core of the rebellion. They were its most steadfast component. It was its most armed element. Of course, others were there. But in the rebellion, it is the armed forces that comes primarily. That was what made that rebellion of 1857 the biggest anti-colonial revolt in the world because no other anti-colonial revolt could bring into field over 120,000 professional soldiers of the kind that Bengal Army brought. Out of 135,000 Bengal Army *sipahis*, only 8,000 remained loyal to the British Army. Now, Members of Parliament, be particularly interested, I think to know the republican sphere or the democratic sentiments of the Bengal Army *sipahis*. Everywhere they formed Councils. They called them Councils. They did not call them “Panchayats.” Others called them panchayats. But they called them Councils. They elected their peers to these Councils to run their affairs. In Delhi they actually constituted a court of administration consisting of their representatives of different contingents who were to rule over Delhi and take all the Government decisions, in practice, setting aside the titular emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. If the revolt had succeeded then we might have had, instead of Central Legislative Assembly, the Court of Administration of Delhi as the initial Parliament in India. So, this is quite an important element in the Bengal Army, for not only they should have the concept of modern organization but also they put such an important stress on the election and choices. It was said that this was also their undoing because there were interminable

discussions before any decision could be taken. Another thing to mark is that despite the criticism of the *sipahis* conduct in British rule, if you really look at for instance in Delhi during the four months of rebel control, there are newspapers and documents in the National Archives, the amount of misconduct by the *sipahis* is limited and it is remarkable. They were not receiving any pay, so they had to get some money out of the civilian population in the beginning. But when they pay was organized they did not harass the civilian population, not even the money lenders. Law and order maintained in Delhi during these four months of rebel control considering these circumstances were indeed remarkable. No one said that their family was plundered or killed by *sipahis*. Contrast this with what happened after the British occupation. There was total slaughter and plunder of the people. The bankers and merchants lost everything; their houses were dug up by what were known as priced officers of English. So, throughout the rebellion the conduct of *sipahis* was in fact exemplary considering the circumstances. As far as religion is concerned, I have already said that religion was certainly a slogan. An idea was developed that both Hindus and Muslims are monotheists and Christians believe in trinity. Muslims and Hindus have common religious values. They believe in God. Everywhere this argument was put forward by the rebels for combining the two. But beyond this, there was an idea that they are loyal to India and the English were people of a different race, who were insulting the Indians. I would like to come to another section in the rebellion, which has been forgotten. There were three newspapers, two were in Urdu and the third one was in Persian. Delhi Urdu Akbar was the major paper. These were the languages of the educated at that time. The major line of Delhi Urdu Akbar was, "English are foreigners; they are goras and we are blacks. They are the Christians and they are the believers of trinity. We are Muslims and Hindus. Muslims believe in Allah and Hindus believe in Adi Purush."

(d/vp)

This is all right as far as combination goes. But then there are patriotic calls for the country. The Paper addresses its readers always as 'fellow countrymen'. Its total loyalty is to Hindustan or India; the sepoys are not the *Bhadshahi Army* or the Royal Army; they are the *fouj Hindustan* or *fouj Hindustani* or the Indian Army. They are often called, irrespective of there being Hindus and Muslims, *azadis*, the holy warriors. There

is a great hero, Bhakth Khan, the republican commander. I may say that he was extremely contemptuous of theologians. He said, for instance, that if any one slaughters cow in Delhi, I will have him killed. He issued orders. They were displayed at the ICHR exhibition the other day against cow slaughter. He said about *mujahideens* or holy warriors who wanted to disturb the Hindu-Muslim relations, that they should be thrown out of the Jama Masjid because they are spoiling the *masjid* by their dirtiness. Actually this was the man whom he praised; he is the republican among the military commanders or the sepoy who was commander-in-chief in Delhi and ultimately went to Lucknow and died fighting in 1959. This was the hero of Delhi Urdu Akbar.

Actually educated population was not certainly under the control of the theologians and they had many modern ideas. Urdu Akbar pleaded that educated people should become artisans. They should manufacture rifles; manual labour was acclaimed and there is no condemnation of any modern means of communication. In fact Feroz Shah said that we would develop steam boats and railways in his Proclamation of August 1857. These sepoys and the educated people were particularly important in giving an orientation to the rebellions and providing the ideological framework. But others were also important, so were the artisans who everywhere joined the rebellions and were actually quite numerous among people called *mujahideens*, civilian volunteers, usually Muslims – although Hindu civilian volunteers were sometimes called *mujahideens* – who actually participated in the rebellion as fighters.

About peasants' participation, I would not say much because that has now been fully recognized particularly after Eric Stokes' work. They were called zamindar leaders or they often – the peasant community often – took independent action, all of which has been well-discussed by Eric Stokes.

It was said by Thorn Hill, a District Magistrate of Mathura in late 1858, that the peasants were the most hostile to the continuance of British rule, and he said that the task of the British should now be to support the land-owners and repress the peasants. So, the peasant participation in the rebellion particularly was influenced first by the taxation or over-taxation, secondly by the fact that the sepoys came from those villages where there were relations between the sepoys and the peasants. That also played a part; but basically

it was over-taxation in the *mahalwari* areas, the loss of their lands or the probability of the loss of their lands, indebtedness, and so on. That took them to the rebellion.

(e/ru)

Now, I would like to take you most respectfully to what Pandit Nehru has said in *The Discovery of India*. He characterizes the rebellion of 1857 as a huge and loud outburst. He repeats this since this formulation at the end of his account of the rebellion of 1857 is extremely emotional. He has a great feeling for the cruelties, executions and plunder that the English inflicted on the population of India. He describes them in detail. Nevertheless, he says that the rebellion was a feudal uprising. Basically, it was a feudal uprising. He must have in mind the fact that many of the major leaders expressed their views on it. Certainly many leaders of the uprising were in fact either princes or zamindars. I need not name them. For example you take Kunwar Singh or Amar Singh, the two zamindars of Jagdishpur who marched through Rewa, Kalpi, Kanpur, Lucknow and Azamgarh. It was said that it has been said by the British narrators on the rebellion, that if the rebels had about a dozen such leaders, then the English rule could never have been imposed. Amar Singh's tactics were praised by them in 1850. They were zamindars and there was Rani of Jhansi, Rani Laxmi Bai and then you have the Hazrat Mahal so stoutly against the British Government when they said that Lucknow should be attacked. There were great heroes of 1857. There were a large number of talukdars who died for the rebellion and were executed for the country by the British. Then you have Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, the zamindar who was ultimately hanged. He was one of the most outspoken despite his age. You have then the Mughals played the most religious role and Bahadur Zafar Khan made up after his early hesitation and ultimately surrendered by his great poetry in which he mourned for the dead. I did not dispute about it. In fact, it is wrong to say that. There are many opinions about it. It was argued that in the 1857 rebellion was essentially the peasantry uprising against the land owners and foreign rule. That it totally incorrect and Mr. P.C. Joshi pointed out at that time about it and I would not argue on it further.

The point is, we must remember that when the talukdars and zamindars and the princely cause went into the rebellion against the greatest colonial power of the world on

the support of the sepoys, the peasantry and the artisans, then their own conceptions changed. Resistance transformed into conceptions.

I would like to bring it to your notice two documents from the Avad rebels. The first document is linguistically very important. In fact, all the rebel documents whether they are newspapers or proclamations, they are important. It is my favourite statement that they are very much against articles of the Constitution that says that Hindi must crown Sanskrit vocabulary. The proclamations were not in Sanskrit vocabulary but entirely on spoken Hindustani. For instance, I have this bilingual one with me here with Urdu on the right and Hindi on the left. The texts are not identical but in Urdu, Hindustani. Urdu words predominate and Persian words are not. In Hindi, the Hindustani words and some Persian words are found and Sanskrit words are practically absent. This was the language of the people. It was a printed one. So, the rebels used the printed version and this was the declaration of the rebellion. It is something different from the old feudal approach. This is not a hukumnama. This is not an order.

(f1/0945/rbn)

“Ishtihar Nama” was their word for “Notice for appeal.” For whom was it meant? It is for zamindars and the ordinary inhabitants. In this text the older values are there. Lands of the zamindars were being taken away by English, which was not done by any previous regime. They respected their lands. The British treated these zamindars at par with menial classes. They are just like cobblers for the English. Therefore, the Indian regime would re-establish the hierarchy. Now, this soon begins to disappear from rebel proclamations. When finally the same rebels, the same court of Hazrat Mahal issued its final reply to Queen Victoria, which comes in November, 1857, all these matters are forgotten. It is the Indian people who are appealed to. If I remember right, the word “Hindustan” does not occur in the first proclamation of July 1857 by the Awadh rebels. But in the reply it is “India” that is found. The exact words used are “The Army and people of India.” They are not to believe Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria’s proclamation is fraud and deception. If they really want to do justice why do they not return Mysore which they took from Tippu Sultan, return Punjab which they took from Dilip Singh and Bengal which they took by fraud and Awadh itself? If Queen Victoria is interested in justice, why does she not do justice by returning the possessions the English have taken?

The second argument was that they will never forgive you. You will continue to fight until the English are thrown out. The fight should not be given up. Now, it is amazing that at that time when everything was lost they should have printed this reply and that they should have said all these things bringing the picture of whole of India in their reply. So, there is a change in the perceptions of the feudal class.

I would like to take up two points which are related. One is the change in the attitude of Rani of Jhansi. That shows how family grievances convert – in today's language we call it national causes -- them into larger causes. Rani of Jhansi had no problem with the British Government if Jhansi had not been annexed and her step son had not been pushed aside. Therefore, she was hesitant to join the rebels. But once she joined, she got into activities which she never could have imagined, like pathan costumes, pathan guards and Muslim gunners, sipahis whom she commanded, the gun foundry, etc. As she was fleeing from Jhansi after the stormy battle she met a Deccan Brahmin.

(g/vp)

Vishnu Bhat then records that she was in Pattan dress with Pattan guards. She wanted to drink water from the well. She then began to talk to me, once she realized that I am a Deccan Brahmin. Vishnu Bhat was coming to Banaras when he got involved in rebellion. He is a neutral observer. Rani Jhansi then said, "I am a poor widow. I should have adopted the *vidhaba dharma* or the widow custom which is prescribed. But fate has so-willed that I am now fighting for the honour of Hindu *dharma*."

That Hindu *dharma* was not the restoration of the customary religion that dictated that she should remain a widow, secluded from everything; that religion now dictated that foreigners should be overthrown. That was her notion, as the notion of the sepoys, of what religion wanted. Rajat Kanta Ray has dealt with this particular interplay of religion and patriotism very well in his felt-community and shown the concept of religion, the loyalty to the particular religion now assumes a particularly patriotic non-sectarian form.

So also about wahabis. My friend Aktadar Alam Khan discussed this matter of wahabis threadbare and I would not say much on this. But the contribution of wahabis, later on claimed to be made in the mutiny, was extremely exaggerated. In fact, their role was not considerable. The role of Muslim volunteers who thought that religion dictated, as a Hindu civilians who joined the rebellion, that *dharma* dictated that they should fight

against the foreigners was certainly considerable. But they had not heard of either Abdul Wahab or Syed Ahmed Baralvi. Certainly I have seen Bhakh Khan who is easily described by Dol Wimple as a wahabi was in fact very hostile to any kind of wahabi sentiment.

I will end by saying that it was common to say previously that a veil should not be drawn on what the British did. It may be diplomatic for us not to raise this question, but what happened after the rebellion broke out cannot be erased from the pages of history. Neil started it - this is much before the Beebeegar massacre in Kanpur. The case is that an Englishman is almost suffocated with indignation when he reads that Mrs. Chamber or Ms. Jinnings was hacked to death. But in native histories – he did not know that the native histories will not say anything about it in our schools. But in native histories or history being wanting in native legends and traditions, it may be recorded against our people, that mothers, wives and children with less familiar names fell miserable victims to the soup of English vengeance and these stories may have as deep a pathos as anything else.

The massacre in Delhi which Dol Wimple describes, but of course you can see it in large number of memoirs that exist and in British reports, is well-known. The whole city was de-populated and massacred. The only thing was that officially, women were not killed – as if, you kill all the womenfolk, how will the women eat, where will they go? Syed Ahmed Khan again describes without sympathy, what happened there; he was a British agent at that time.

(h/955/ru)

The Nagina civilians thought that plunder would occur and they took some of their families away but they were all slaughtered. It went on for the whole day. Only one man who was there was exempted because he had refused to sign the fatwa against the British. Otherwise, all innocent people were slaughtered. But Ahmed Khan described this without a word of sympathy. When this is his position, you can imagine the British attitude. On plunder of Koshtipur, Vishnu Bhatt says that you know that in Delhi only Muslims were slaughtered. In Koshtipur and Jhansi, he said that since Rani of Jhansi was a Brahmin, all Brahmins were slaughtered. In Koshtipur, all men, women and children were slaughtered.

Clearly, retribution is part of history. The way retribution has occurred is part of history. It is not possible to erase it. It should not be erased. If rebels killed English in terms of hundreds, the English killed us in terms of tens of thousands. Every murder of an English man was punished by punishing the guilty and innocent alike. No murder of an Indian was punished. How can one treat them as equals? Therefore, when we talk about good things under the British rule like the building of Indian Civil Service, we should think of not only the rebels but also the ordinary citizens, men, women and children who lost their lives and were hacked to death, killed by various means of torture in 1857 and 1858.

(ends)

(1/1010/ru)

MR. SPEAKER: I must convey our sincere gratitude to Prof. Habib for his illuminating and scintillating speech he has delivered. He has thrown new lights on the whole issue.

SHRI MANI SHANKAR AIYAR: After hearing the reply which you gave to the question of Mr. Mahtab, I would like to be enlightened a little bit more about the role of South India. There were a huge number of rebellions against the British rule in the South. The role of Veerapandiya Kattabomman, the Vellore mutiny of 1806, the role of the Southern Rani of Jhansi who is hardly mentioned at all namely, Rani Chellammal, are worth of appreciation. Whether it is Tamil Nadu or Kerala or Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh, there were a number of very eminent rebellions. But could you just enlighten us the role of the South in this uprising?

PROF. IRFAN HABIB: I cannot improve upon what you have already said. But you know that in our television, there was a documentary about Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan and there was a court ruling that you must say this is not history but mythology or something like that. I have not seen this kind of reservation in the serials on our television. But the judiciary took care to ensure that Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan should be treated as mythical characters. Actually, you are quite right that our mutiny escapes attention. Almost everything happened in the rebellion of 1857. To discuss the

comparable event, I am not very sure if the thesis of exhaustion could be used but the fact is that before the full integration of the country, we must realize it that sometimes connections were difficult. And going into a rebellion is a dramatic decision and one is really surprised how this decision was taken in Northern India in 1857 when people knew that this was playing with life. You can have a comparison with the two Punjab Wars. The two Punjab Wars must always be remembered in any history of Indian resistance. There had not been such a strong resistance to British expansion. as in the two Punjab Wars. The British never had to fight such hard battles in which the Bengal Army lost thousands of soldiers. But in 1857 all the revolts in Punjab were basically Bengal Army sepoys revolting where they were posted. So, these differences are bound to take place in such historical events. In a sense you can say that the revolt had not a chance of expanding because within a year or less than six months, it was stamped out. One could not say what would have happened had it been successful.