

The other book to come out on the occasion of the centenary was a collection of essays edited by P.C. Joshi. In his essay, "1857 In Our History", Joshi uses Marx's analysis of British imperialism to argue for a nationalist interpretation of the Uprising:

"The central aim of the 1857-58 insurrection was to destroy the British state in India and establish an Indian State in its place... If this does not make this uprising a national revolt, what else will?" (p139)

It was not unnatural that Indian historians continued to tussle with the question of what 1857 represented in the centenary year, coming as it did soon after Independence. Subsequent studies have, however, tried to move beyond the binary of Mutiny versus War of Independence. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, in *Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858: A Study in Popular Resistance* (1984) offers the analysis that 1857 was the result of a combination of several factors:

"Here was a military mutiny, sparked off by certain fears about caste and religion, merging itself with disaffection created by interventions in the traditional rural world of Awadh, using the loss of land, loss of a king and threats to religion as a rallying cry, seeking its identity in the traditions of a former despotism and finding its popular base among a rural confraternity held together by bonds of mutual interdependence." (p169)

Mukherjee prefers to characterise the revolt in Awadh a "popular rejection of an alien order" (p170) where both Hindus and Muslims had equally to lose or gain.

A more recent analysis of 1857 by Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, (2003) focuses on the role of religion and how it brought together Hindus and Muslims in a common cause against the British. The war of religion, in Ray's interpretation, becomes one "consisting of two communities striving to construct their respective sacred realms by ousting the common enemy, and at the same time profoundly moved by a sense of the land as one indivisible whole." (p375) He points to Bahadur Shah Zafar's proclamation where the English are labelled the common enemies of both Hindus and Muslims, and they are exhorted to unite in slaughtering the British. The Hindus and Muslims rose simultaneously to protect their 'dharma' and 'din' and to 'save the country'. Thus, Ray notes:

"The emotions going into the making of Indian nationalism had a palpable presence in 1857, although still devoid of the conceptual form imparted by the modern political nation." (p395)

Here, we see once again the long shadow of that question asked by Disraeli 150 years ago.

The debate over the nature of 1857 continues to rage mainly because of its unique position in Indian history: it was not only the first widespread resistance to British rule but it also brought about fundamental changes in relations between the rulers and the ruled. Ray points out, "The Mutiny constitutes the great disjuncture in the development of the Indian nation: it is not a part of the national movement,

nor is it the dying throes of the old order." (p358) This has meant that Indian historians have willy-nilly been drawn like moths to fire to the question of how to place 1857 in the story of Indian nationalism. In this endeavour Savarkar's work has been a looming presence, and often—as in the case of Majumdar—the invisible adversary. It was, of course, the first book on 1857 written from the point of view of the Indian actors. As Chaudhuri says, "*The Indian War of Independence* proved to be a turning point in the historiography as a whole." (p171) The power of Sarvkar's narrative lies in the construction of an elaborate mythology around the martyrs of 1857, as Majumdar puts it, "the products of romantic and patriotic sentiments, rather than of an objective study of historical facts." (pxi) Ironically, most of the later Indian historians, schooled in conventional notions of objectivity, would differ from Majumdar: The majority, as we saw above, accepted that 1857 contained elements of an inchoate nationalism.

The durability of Savarkar's mythologising is apparent from the popularity of the 'heroes' of 1857 such as Rani of Jhansi or Tatia Tope in the public realm. Though Majumdar tried his best to show that "all the leading figures in this great outbreak were alienated from the British for private reasons," (p225) it is precisely these figures that have remained inscribed in popular memory. More than 50 years after the event, songs in praise of the Rani of Jhansi continued to be sung by villagers. Closer to our times, Bollywood films and Amar Chitra comics celebrate Mangal Pandey, a sepoy of the 34th Regiment at Barrackpore, who in Savarkar's words was the first "martyr of the revolutionary war". The futility of combating the popular perceptions of 1857 with cold objectivity was recognised even by Majumdar, who admits, "The memory of the Revolt of 1857, distorted but hallowed with sanctity, perhaps did more damage to the cause of the British rule in India than the Revolt itself." (p278) ■

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In defence of faith

Religious rhetoric in the Delhi uprising of 1857

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The Uprising of 1857 produced one or two impeccably secular declarations. The much-quoted Azimgarh Proclamation, for example, an Avadhi production of late August 1857 and issued by the young Prince Feroz Shah, is the nearest thing produced during the Uprising to a manifesto of national independence. Its opening sentence sets the tone, a cry to arms noting that "both Hindoos and Mohammedans are being ruined under the tyranny and oppression of the infidel and treacherous English." While noting that "at present a war is ranging with the English on account of religion," and calling on "pundits and fakirs" to join with Mughal armies, most of its space is given over to complaints that the English have overtaxed the landowners, monopolised "all the posts of dignity and emolument" in the civil and armed services and put Indian artisans out of business by flooding the market with cheap British imports.

Yet what is striking about so many of the public proclamations coming out of the Uprising's storm centre of Delhi during 1857 was the emphatically religious articulation that the

documents take on all sides of the conflict. In Delhi there is little talk about textile imports or land tenure or taxation, at least in the surviving public proclamations of the rebels. Instead the overwhelming theme of the rhetoric of the Delhi Uprising centred around the threat that the Company posed to religion. This is not to say that there were not many deeply felt, very concrete and thoroughly secular grievances. Yet the public declarations concerned only one thing: as the sepoys told Zafar on 11 May 1857, "we have joined hands to protect our religion and our faith".¹ Later they stood in the Chandni Chowk, the main street of Delhi, and asked people: "Brothers: are you with those of the faith?"² British men and women who had converted to Islam—and there were a surprising number of those in Delhi—were not hurt; but Indians who had converted to Christianity were cut down immediately.

Even if one accepts that the word 'religion' (for Muslims *din*) is often being used in the very general and non-sectarian sense of *dharma* (or duty, righteousness)—so that when the sepoys saying they are rising to defend their *dharma*, they mean as much their



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A Sikh Soldier of Hodson's Horse, Lucknow. By Felice Beato, albumen print (1857-58). Hodson's Horse from the Khalsa State Force was one of the last to join the 'irregular' army of the British.

way of life as their sectarian religious identity—it is still highly significant that the Urdu sources from Delhi repeatedly refer to the British not as “angrez” (the English) or as *goras* (whites) or even *firangis* (foreigners, Franks), but instead almost always as *kafirs* (infidels) and *nasrani* (Christians).

The Court

In particular the tone of the letters and petitions and proclamations issued from the Mughal court in 1857 is overwhelming religious in subject matter: over and over again we are told—‘*Yeh laray mazhab ke liye shuru huee*’ or, at other times—‘*Yeh laray din ke liye shuru huee*’. Yet the religious language is expressed in such a way that is clearly and explicitly inclusive of both Hindus and Muslims, as one would expect from the court at this period.

Zafar’s eldest surviving legitimate son Mirza Mughal was almost certainly behind a circular letter sent out in Zafar’s name to all the Princes and Rajahs of India, asking for them to join the uprising and appealing for their loyalty on the grounds that all faiths were under attack by the British. The letter refers specifically to the laws banning sati and allowing converts to inherit, and Company’s facilitation of missionary activity and the alleged conversion of prisoners locked in British jails:

“The English are people who overthrow all religions,” it states. “You should understand well their object of destroying the religions of Hindustan... It is now my firm conviction that if the English continue in Hindustan they will... utterly overthrow our religions. As the English are the common enemy of both [Hindus and Muslims, we] should unite in considering their slaughter... for by this alone will the lives and faiths of both be saved.”³

Maulvi Muhammed Baqir, the outspoken editor of the *Dibli Urdu Akbhar*, and father of the Urdu poet and critic Muhammad Husain Azad echoed this vision in slightly different and more explicitly Islamic language. At the outbreak of the Uprising, in May 1857 he wrote in his columns how the rebellion had been sent by God to punish the *kafirs* for their arrogant plan to wipe out the religions of India. For him the speed and thoroughness of the reverses suffered by the British was proof of miraculous divine intervention, and it was no surprise therefore that such an event should be accompanied by dreams and visions:

“One venerable man had a dream that our Prophet Mohammed, Praise Be Upon Him, said to Jesus that your followers have become an enemy of my name and wish to efface my religion. To this Lord Jesus replied that the British are not my followers, they do not follow my path, they have joined ranks with Satan’s followers... Some people even swear that the day the troopers came here, there were camels ahead of them on which rode green-robed riders... These green riders instantly vanished from sight and only the troopers remained, killing whichever Englishman they found, cutting them up as if they were carrots or radishes... Truly the English have been afflicted with divine wrath by the true avenger. Their arrogance has brought them divine retribution for, as the Holy Koran says, ‘God does

not love the arrogant ones.’”⁴

No less excited by the new turn of events was Baqar’s 27-year-old son, Muhammad Husain, later to become famous as the poet Azad. The second edition of the paper to be published after the arrival of the sepoy in Delhi, that of the 24 May, contained Azad’s first published poem, entitled *A History of Instructive Reversals*. The ghazals began with a series of rhetorical questions—where now was the empire of Alexander? Where the realm of Solomon?—before moving on to the fate of the Christian empire in India:

“Yesterday the Christians were in the ascendant,
World-seizing, world-bestowing,
The possessors of skill and wisdom,

their petitions as Mujahedin or *ghazis* (warriors).

It needs of course to be stated that the concept of jihad is a richly ambiguous one, that it varies according to context, and that the struggle referred to can take many forms. It is also true that the term Mujahedin can refer to a variety of different kinds of volunteer. Moreover, we find on occasion the term ‘jihad’ being used at this period by and about Hindus, so in Delhi in the Mutiny Papers we find two of the Hindu sepoy generals, Generals Sudhari and Hira Singh using the term to describe their fight against the British.

Nevertheless, when the Delhi sources of 1857 refer to the Mujahedin

It was not religious principles but the lack of a generally agreed leadership that led to the failure of the defence of Delhi. The British achieved victory for the same unromantic and unheroic reason they achieved victory almost everywhere else in India: they were famous for paying their troops as regularly as they promised. At the beginning of the siege of Delhi, an all-white Christian army faced a largely upper caste Hindu army of their former sepoys. By the end, the British had managed to recruit a new and religiously mixed army that defied the religious rhetoric on both sides: 4/5th of the so-called British Army was Sikh, or Punjabi Muslim or Pathan; and facing them was the remnants of the sepoy army which had gathered in Delhi—perhaps as few as 25,000 of the original 100,000 sepoys along with what the British intelligence officers estimated as 25,000 of the Mujahedin

The possessors of splendour and glory
The possessors of a mighty army.

But what use was that,
Against the sword of the Lord of Fury?
All their wisdom could not save them,
Their schemes became useless,
Their knowledge and science availed them nothing—
The Telingas of the East have killed them all.

O Azad, learn this lesson:
For all their wisdom and vision,
The Christian rulers have been erased,
Without leaving a trace in this world.”⁵
Even Zafar himself articulated the Uprising as a religious war:

“As late as the 6th September, at the very end of the siege when calling the people of Delhi to rally against the coming assault by the British, a proclamation issued in the name of Zafar spelled out very plainly “that this is a religious war, and is being prosecuted on account of the faith, and it behoves all Hindus and Musalman residents of the imperial city, or of the villages in the country... to continue true to their faith and creeds.”⁶

The Mujahedin

A quite different tone emerges from rhetoric of the groups of Muslim fighters who identified themselves in

and the Ghazis they are referring quite explicitly to the armed Muslim groups that arrived at Delhi—made up of a ragtag assortment of ‘Wahhabi’ maulvis, militant Naqshandis and, most numerous of all, pious Muslim civilians—especially “weavers, artisans and other wage earners”—who believed it was their duty to free what they regarded as the *Dar ul-Islam* from the rule of the *Kafirs* [infidels], and some of whom are explicit in their wish to seek martyrdom.⁷

Some Mujahedin were already in Delhi before the outbreak. By the end of the third day of the Uprising, so many of the richest havelis had been broken into and looted, usually with the excuse that the inhabitants were sheltering Christians, that Mufti Sadruddin Azurda helped form a private police force to protect himself and his circle. The men he turned to were the only Delhiwallahs with sufficient arms and military training to take on the sepoys. These were the fighters of the underground Mujahedin network that seems to have survived on the trading route linking Peshawar, Tonk, Delhi and Patna since the time of Sayyid Ahmed Bareilvi, a brotherhood, bound to fight the jihad by oaths of allegiance (or *bayat*) to a leader (or *amir*). These now cast off their veil of secrecy and began to mass in Delhi, ready for the holy war they had so long prepared for.

According to Jawan Lal’s diary the Mujahedin force was operational by 15 May. During the trial of Azurda at the end of the Uprising, the three

commanders of his jihadi guard were named—‘Abd ur-Rahman Ludhianawi, his son Sayf ur-Rahman and Muhammad Munir—and the reasons for their employment were discussed in court. Later in the uprising these jihadis did succeed in fending off an attack on Azurda’s house, according to Jawan Lal:

“The house of Moulvie Sadar ud din Khan was attacked today by fifty soldiers; but, seeing that there were seventy jihadis ready to oppose them, they retreated, but carried off two colts from the house of Ahsanullah Khan.”

Even more unequivocal is the report of Azurda’s refusing a demand for money, saying that the *ghazis* he had employed would be used for his defence.

Four hundred men identified in the Delhi sources as Mujahedin and *ghazis* marched in during the first week of the siege from nearby Gurgaon, Hansi and Hissar, but much the largest contingent—well over 4,000 strong—came from the small Muslim principality of Tonk in Rajasthan, which had a history of welcoming ‘Wahhabi’ preachers, and which had been regarded by British intelligence officers as the centre of an underground centre of the Mujahedin movement since the time Sayyid Ahmed Bareilvi.

On arrival the Mujahedin set up camp both in the courtyard of the Jama Masjid, and that of the riverside Zinat ul-Masajid, the most beautiful of all the Delhi mosques.

In contrast to the notably inclusive language of the court, Mujahedin documents are sometimes nakedly communal. On 19 May, one of the more orthodox imams of Delhi, Maulvi Muhammad Sayyid, set up a standard of jihad in the Jama Masjid, in an apparent effort to turn the Uprising into an exclusively Muslim Holy War. Zafar immediately ordered it to be taken down “because such a display of fanaticism would only tend to exasperate the Hindus”.

The next day, the 20th, just as news came that the Delhi Field Force was collecting in Ambala, the Maulvi turned up at the palace to remonstrate with Zafar, claiming that the Hindus were all supporters of the English, and that a jihad against them was therefore perfectly legitimate. At the same time a delegation of Delhi Hindus also turned up at the fort, angrily denying the Maulvi’s charge. Zafar declared that in his eyes Hindus and Muslims were equal and that “such a jihad is quite impossible, and such an idea an act of extreme folly, for the majority of the *Purbeah* soldiers were Hindus. Such an act would create internecine war and the results would be deplorable. The Holy War is against the English,” said Zafar emphatically. “I have forbidden it against the Hindus.”⁸

The Mujahedin and their firebrand maulvis calling for jihad in the city’s mosques did however appeal to a few of Delhi’s Muslims, and the people of Delhi remained dubious about the pleasure of hosting in addition several thousand holy warriors. This was especially so given the far from friendly attitude of the Mujahedin towards Delhi’s Hindus—half the city’s population—and the importance the Delhi elite placed on not upsetting the delicate equilibrium between Hindus and Muslims in the city: “Their stated object was a crusade against the infidel,”



Jama Masjid, Delhi. By Samuel Bourne, albumen print (1865). In the immediate aftermath of the Uprising, the Jama Masjid was almost destroyed. The building was desecrated by the British soldiers billeted there and the prayer halls were used as stables

wrote Sa'id Mubarak Shah, "their real one was plunder. In this manner fully five thousand men from various quarters poured into Delhi as *ghazis*, the majority armed with *gundasabs* [battle axes] and dressed in blue tunics and green turbans."⁹

Such was the coolness of the reception given to the Mujahedin that it was not long before one of their maulvis came before Zafar to complain that they were being unjustly neglected:

"We Mujahedin have displayed great valour and dedication but until now we have received no appreciation for it, nor has there even been any enquiries as to how we have fared... We only hope that our services will be recognised and rewarded, so we will be able to continue to participate in the battle."¹⁰

A similar petition came a fortnight later from a man who described himself as the Principal Risaldar of the Tonk Mujahedin. In his case the complaint was more serious: his jihadis had been deserted by the sepoy during an assault and left to take on the *kafir* infidels all by themselves:

"We joined in the attack yesterday, and 18 infidels were despatched to Hell by your slave's own hands, and five of his followers were killed and five wounded. Your Majesty, the rest of the army gave us no help whilst we were engaged in combat with the infidels. Had they even made a show of support, as was to have been expected, with the help of Providence a complete victory yesterday would have been achieved... I trust that now some arms, together with some trifling funds, may be bestowed on my followers, so that they might have the strength to fight and slay the infidels, and so realise their desires."

Considering this, it is hardly surprising that there is evidence of tension, not only between the Mujahedin and the people of Delhi but also between the sepoy and the

Mujahedin. It is a measure of the distrust and tension between the sepoy and jihadis that although they often fought side by side, the sepoy seem nonetheless to have regularly searched individuals going in and out of both mosques, and detained several people whom they regarded as suspicious.¹¹ Occasionally the tension between the overwhelmingly Hindu sepoy and the militantly Muslim mujahedin erupted into full-scale street fights.¹²

Towards the end of July the jihadis made the most serious breach in the common front that had been so successfully maintained by both Hindus and Muslims. The feast of Bakr 'Id was approaching; to the horror of the court, who had always made huge efforts never to allow the city to be divided on communal grounds, the jihadis went out of their way deliberately to offend Hindu feelings. As Mohammad Baqar wrote:

"The Ghazees who have come from Tonk have determined to kill a cow on the open space in front of the Jama Masjid on the day of 'Id, some three days hence. They say that if the Hindus offer any opposition to this, they will kill them, and after settling accounts with the Hindus they will then attack and destroy the *Firangis*, 'For,' say they, 'we are to be martyrs for the faith and the honours of martyrdom are to be obtained just as well by killing a Hindu as by killing a *firangi*'."¹³

Shortly afterwards, on 19 July, some Hindu sepoy cut the throats of five Muslim butchers they accused of cow killing. A full scale crisis, dividing the city down its central religious axis, looked imminent. This was something Zafar had always dreaded, since Delhi was almost exactly half Hindu, he had always clearly understood that it would be impossible to rule without the consent and blessing of half his subjects; moreover he had a Hindu mother, and had always followed enough Hindu customs to profoundly alarm the more orthodox *ulama*.

Now he rose to the occasion with an unusually decisive response. The same day as the butchers were killed, Zafar banned the butchery of cows, forbade the eating of beef, and authorised for anyone found killing a cow the terrible punishment of being blown from a cannon. The police reacted immediately, even going so far as to arrest any kebab wallah who was found grilling beef kebabs. One of these, Hafiz Abdurrahman, wrote to the court swearing that he was not a butcher and could not be held responsible for cow slaughter; moreover he had only taken up his current profession of kebab grilling after his usual business had been ruined by the rioting of the sepoy. He was not, however, released.¹⁴

Next, Zafar issued an order that all the town's cows should be registered, with *chaukidars* and sweepers of the different *muballas* instructed to report to the local police station all "cow-owning Muslim households" and for each police thana then to make out a list "of all the cows being bred by the followers of Islam" and to send it to the palace. This order the *thanadars* were instructed to carry out within six hours.¹⁵ On the 30th, the Kotwal, Sa'id Mubarak Shah, was instructed to proclaim loudly throughout the town that cow killing was absolutely forbidden since it would cause "unnecessary strife which will only strengthen the enemy;" anyone "who even harbours the thought or acts in defiance of the government order will receive severe punishment."¹⁶

Further orders followed, including one oddly surreal directive commanding that all the registered cows should now be given shelter in the central city's police station, the Kotwali. Zafar may have been unwilling or unable to lock up the jihadis, but he could lock up the cows.

Throughout all this, there is evidence that the Delhi elite was seriously worried by the possibility of a split developing between the Delhi Hindus and Muslims. Things came to such a

pass that Maulvi Muhammad Baqar included in his columns of the *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* a call for the Hindus of the city not to lose heart—which of course implied that they were beginning to do just that. A remarkable letter aimed at his Hindu readers was included in Baqar's issue of 14 June. In it, he called for all Delhi's citizens to pull together against the common British enemy, whom he compared to Ravana, the demon king in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. "O my countrymen," he wrote;

"Looking at the strategy and devious cleverness of the English, their ability to make arrangements and to order the world in the way they wish, the wide expanses of their dominions and their overflowing treasuries and revenues, you may feel disheartened that such a people could ever be overcome. But my Hindu brothers, if you look in your Holy books you will see how many magnificent dynasties have come into being in the land of Hindustan, and how they all met their end. Even Ravana and his army of demons was beaten by Raja Ramchandra [the Hindu God King Ram]... Except the Adipurush, the primaeval Deity, nothing is permanent..."

If God brings all these magnificent kingdoms to an end after a short period, why do you not comprehend that God has sent his hidden help [to defeat] this hundred year old kingdom [of the British] so that this community [the Christians] who regarded the children of God with contempt, and addressed your brothers and sisters as 'black men,' have now been insulted and humiliated? Realise this, and you will lose your fear and apprehension. To run away and turn your back now would be akin to denying divine help and favour...¹⁷

The Hindus

Hindus too, though more elusive in the Delhi documents, had their leaders who turned to the scriptures to encourage their people to fight. One Brahmin in particular, Pandit Harichandra seems to have been particularly prominent and appears in several British intelligence reports. Reported one spy:

"He tells the officers that by virtue of his astrological and esoteric arts he has learned that the divine forces will support the army. He has named an auspicious day when he says there will be a terrifying fight, a new Kurukshetra [the battle at the climax of the Mahabharata] like the one between the Kauravas and the Pandavas of yore. He tells the sepoy that their horses' feet will be drenched in British blood and then the victory will be theirs. All the people in the army have great faith in him, so much so that the time and the place designated by the Pandit are chosen for the fighting."¹⁸

The Christians

But it was the religious rhetoric of Christians that was arguably the most extreme of all.

India in the 1840's and '50s was slowly filling with pious British Evangelicals who wanted not just to rule and administer India, but also to redeem and improve it. In Calcutta, Mr. Edmunds was vocal in making known his belief that the Company should use

its position more forcibly to bring about the conversion of India. "The time appears to have come," he wrote in a widely read circular letter, "when earnest consideration should be given to the subject, whether or not all men should embrace the same system of religion. Railways, steam vessels and the electric telegraph are rapidly uniting all the nations of the earth... The land is being leavened and Hinduism is being everywhere undermined. Great will some day, in God's appointed time, be the fall of it."¹⁹

Nor was it any longer just the missionaries who dreamt of converting India. To the north west of Delhi, the Commissioner of Peshawar, Herbert Edwardes, firmly believed an empire had been given to Britain because of the virtues of English Protestantism: "The Giver of Empires is indeed God," he wrote, and He gave the Empire to Britain because "England had made the greatest effort to preserve the Christian religion in its purest apostolic form."²⁰

Worst of all was Revd. John Midgely Jennings, the British chaplain who installed himself in chambers inside the Lahore Gate of the Red Fort from which he poured forth a stream of explicitly anti-Hindu and Islamophobic pamphlets. The city of the Mughal, Jennings had concluded, was nothing less than a last earthly bastion of the Prince of Darkness himself. He wrote: "Within its walls, the pride of life, the lust of the eye and all the lusts of the flesh have reigned and revelled to the full, and all the glories of the Kingdoms of this portion of the earth have passed from one wicked possessor to another. It is as though it were permitted the Evil One there at least to verify his boast that he giveth it to whom he will; but of truth, of meekness and of righteousness the power has not been seen..."²¹

Jennings' plan was to rip up what he regarded as the false faiths of India, by force if necessary: "The roots of ancient religions have here, as in all old places, struck deep and men must be able to fathom deep in order to uproot them."²² His method was simple: to harness the power of the rising British Empire—clearly the instrument "of the mysterious sway of Gods Providence"—towards converting the heathen.

The British Crown, argued Jennings in his prospectus for his proposed Delhi Mission, was now the proud possessor of the Koh-i Noor diamond, once the property of the Mughals, India's greatest dynasty. In gratitude, the British should now endeavour in earnest to bring about the conversion of India and so "give in return that 'pearl of great price' [the Christian faith]... As the course of our Empire is so marvellously taking its course from the East of India towards its West," so should the British be preparing to conquer the subcontinent for Anglicanism and the one true God.²³ There should, he believed, be no compromise with false religions.

In the course of the Uprising, and particularly after the slaughter of the British women and children both in Delhi and at Kanpur, this language grew more violent. George Wagentrieber was the editor of the *Delhi Gazette*, who escaped Delhi on 11 May and now invoked the Christian God in

his editorials as he called for a bloody revenge: referring to the rebels as "hell hounds". Wagentrieber says that they have "executed thus far their diabolical scheme of raising once again the standard of the lascivious Prophet, in opposition to the new dispensation offered to mankind, in the man Christ Jesus, the son of God..."

Hindoo and Moslem have proclaimed their caste and their religion to the world in a mass of fiendish cruelty that stands as unparalleled in the world's history. The punishment about to be inflicted will likewise be equivalent: Justice is Mercy—"blood for blood" will be the watchword throughout the storm pending over the doomed city; the British soldier must hurry: the Avenging Angel uses you in the massacre that awaits your advance on Delhi."

As far as many of the British troops were concerned, their fury and thirst for revenge was not so much a desire as a right enshrined in the Bible. One British soldier, 'Quaker' Wallace, was in the habit of bayoneting his sepoy adversaries while chanting the 116th psalm. As General Neill put it, "The Word of God gives no authority to the modern tenderness for human life."²⁴

This was echoed by Padre Rotton; the chaplain of the Delhi Field Force was in full agreement. The rebels did not realise, he wrote, that the Uprising was in fact, "a battle of principles, a conflict between truth and error; and that because they had elected in favour of darkness, and eschewed the light, therefore they could not possibly succeed. Moreover, they had imbrued their hands in the innocent blood of helpless women and children, and that very blood was [now] appealing to heaven for vengeance. The appeal was unquestionably heard. The Lord could not otherwise than be avenged on such a nation as this."²⁵

Conclusion

For all that the uprising in Delhi was expressed in religious rhetoric, and for all that it continued to be represented as such by the participants as the siege of Delhi continued, reality and rhetoric came increasingly to diverge as their siege neared its end.

It was not religious principles but the lack of a generally agreed leadership that led to the failure of the defence of Delhi. None of the sepoys would take orders from the subedar of any other regiment, so they fought in a disconnected and uncoordinated fashion. On top of this there was a failure to gather intelligence, to coordinate effectively with other rebel centres such as Kanpur and Lucknow, or to persuade most of the independent rajahs of Central India and Rajputana to come off the fence and join with the cause.

But the rebellion was defeated as much because of the shortcomings of the rebels' administrative and financial organisation, as much as their military and strategic failures. They had created turbulence and chaos, but could not restore order. This was particularly fatal for them in the countryside around Delhi. Their failure to establish a well-governed 'liberated area' or Mughal realm from which they could draw tax revenue, manpower and most of all food supplies, ultimately proved the Delhi rebels' single most disastrous failure. No food was coming in, so prices rose dramatically, and starvation

soon set in. By the time the British finally assaulted the city on 14 September, the number of sepoy defenders had sunk from a peak of 100,000 down to 25,000. Most left because of hunger: the rebel administration had failed to provide either food or pay or munitions.

As early as 7 June, even the employees of the Royal Household were complaining that they had received no rations for a month.²⁶ On 12 June the deputy kotwal wrote to his assistants begging them to find some food for the new battalions from Haryana who had just marched into Delhi. At the bottom is the reply: "It is submitted that there is nothing left in the shops, no flour, no pulses, nothing. What should we do?"²⁷ By 15 June, the officers of the different regiments were coming to the Fort and complaining that their troops could not attack the British on empty stomachs, and that their sepoys had begun returning, "driven back by hunger before the battle is over."²⁸

Six weeks later, on 28 July, Kishan Dayal and Qadir Bahksh, Subahdars of the Meerut sepoys, came to court to say their men were now starving. They had left behind in Meerut all their possessions when they mutinied, "so are now very hard pressed. Some eighteen days have passed and we have not even received a single chick-pea. My men are dismayed at the expense of everything, and there are no money-lenders who will give them loans."²⁹

In contrast the British achieved victory for the same unromantic and unheroic reason they achieved victory almost everywhere else in India: they were famous for paying their troops as regularly as they promised. It was this that allowed them to recruit a brand new mercenary army from the Punjab and send it to the Delhi Ridge; a mercenary army that was—for all the religious and jihadi rhetoric coming out of the besieged city—at least half Pathan and Punjabi Muslim.

At the beginning of the siege of Delhi, an all-white Christian army faced a largely upper caste Hindu army of their former sepoys. By the end, the British had managed to recruit a new and religiously mixed army that defied the religious rhetoric on both sides: 4/5th of the so-called British Army was Sikh, or Punjabi Muslim or Pathan; and facing them was the remnants of the sepoy army which had gathered in Delhi—perhaps as few as 25,000 of the original 100,000 sepoys along with what the British intelligence officers estimated as 25,000 of the Mujahedin.

Every generation writes history that reflects the times in which they live. Marxist and nationalist historians, many of them proud atheists, writing after the freedom struggle emphasised the secular social and economic nature of the grievances Indians had against the British, at least partly in reaction to the emphasis given by the Victorians to religious matters, and the tendency of the British to blame the entire Uprising on an entirely mythical "international Muslim conspiracy" with links to Mecca and Teheran. But in our own time, after Ayodhya and 9/11, it is not difficult to feel that earlier generations have perhaps a little underplayed the power of faith and religion as a motivator and mover of men in 1857. Religion is not the only force at work, nor perhaps the primary one; but to ignore its power and importance, at

least in the rhetoric used to justify the Uprising, seems to go against the huge weight of emphasis on this factor given in the rebels' own documents.

End Notes:

- ¹ NAI, Mutiny Papers, Collection 60, number 830
- ² OIOC, Eur Mss B 138, *The City of Delhi during 1857*, Translation of the account of Said Mobarak Shah.
- ³ The letter was first printed in English in N.A. Chick., *Annals of the Indian Rebellion 1857-8* Calcutta 1859 (reprinted London 1972) p101-3. It has recently been reprinted in Salim al-Din Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom: Proclamations of Muslim Revolutionaries of 1857*. Lahore 1997.
- ⁴ *Dibli Urdu Akbhar*, issue of 17 May 1857.
- ⁵ This translation is my own colloquial reworking of the more literal translation given by Fran Pritchett in *Nets*, p24.
- ⁶ Quoted by the prosecution in the concluding speech at the trial of Zafar. *Proceedings of the Trial of Muhammad Bahadur Shah, Titular King of Delhi, Before a Military Commission, upon a charge of Rebellion, Treason and Murder, held at Delhi, on the 27th Day of January 1858, and following days* London 1859, p142.
- ⁷ Irfan Habib, *The Coming of 1857 in Social Scientist*, Volume 26, Number 1, Jan-April 1998, p12
- ⁸ *Two Native Narratives. Narrative of Munshi Jawan* p98. There is another account of the same incident in *Trial*, Narrative of Chuni Lal, newswriter p108.
- ⁹ OIOC, Eur Mss, B 138, *Account of Said Mobarak Shah*.
- ¹⁰ NAI, Mutiny Papers. Collection 65, No.36; Petition of Maulvi Sarfaraz Ali, 10 September 1857.
- ¹¹ See for example, National Archives of India, Mutiny Papers, Collection 67, No 77, 27 July 1857 for Zinat ul-Masajid; and Collection 15, file 1 for Jama Masjid.
- ¹² See for example, National Archives of India, Mutiny Papers, Collection 73, No 171.
- ¹³ DCO archive, New Delhi. Mutiny Papers. File No 5028 July 1857. Translation of a letter from Munshree Mahomed Bakar, 28 July, Editor of the Delhi Oordoo Akhbar
- ¹⁴ NAI, Mutiny Papers. Collection 103, No.132; 14 July 1857
- ¹⁵ NAI, Mutiny Papers. Collection 45; 26 July 1857
- ¹⁶ NAI, Mutiny Papers. Collection 111c, No.64; 30 July 1857
- ¹⁷ *Dibli Urdu Akbhar*, 14 June.
- ¹⁸ NAI, Mutiny Papers. Collection 15, No.19. Undated.
- ¹⁹ Derrick Hughes, *The Mutiny Chaplains*. p 20
- ²⁰ Quoted by Charles Allen, *Soldier Sabibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier* London 2000 p 340
- ²¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth & African Studies at Rhodes House Missionary Collections, Jennings Papers. "Proposed Mission at Delhi"
- ²² Oxford, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth & African Studies at Rhodes House Missionary Collections, Jennings Papers, *Copies of Letters by the Revd Midgeley Jennings, Chaplain of Delhi 1851-57*. JMJ to Hawkins, 4 May 1852
- ²³ Oxford, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth & African Studies at Rhodes House Missionary Collections, Jennings Papers. "Proposed Mission at Delhi"
- ²⁴ Cited by Christopher Hibbert, *Great Mutiny* p201, 340
- ²⁵ John Edward Rotton, *The Chaplain's Narrative of the Siege of Delhi*. London 1858, p123
- ²⁶ Abdul Latif, *1857 Ka Tarikhi Roznamacha*, ed K.A Nizami, Naqwatul Musannifin Delhi 1958. entry for 7 June.
- ²⁷ NAI, Mutiny Papers, Collection 128, number 39 dated 12 June.
- ²⁸ *Memoirs of Hakim Ahanullah Khan ed by S Moinul Haq, Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi 1958*. p16
- ²⁹ NAI, Mutiny Papers, Collection 57, numbers 185/186, dated 28 July 1857.