*Blowing from Guns in British India.*

# 1857 Indian Uprising

*By Whitney Howarth*

In 1857, uprisings and rebellions ended the British East India Company's (EIC) control in India, then it became an official British colony. Historians continue to debate the nature of these uprisings.

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## Imperialism in South Asia

In 1783, Great Britain was stinging from its defeat in the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the recent loss of the 13 promising colonies there. In the aftermath, the British took a closer look at exploiting the Indian subcontinent. The British East India Company (EIC) intensified its efforts to collect taxes. It sought to dominate Mughal territories in this vast, populous region. The Muslim Mughal Empire had ruled much of this part of South Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The EIC was a business that did international trade. However, it also conquered and ruled over an increasing number of territories and independent states in India. In other words, its "business" was in large part imperialism. "The Company," as it was called, expanded its power and control of resources by means of colonization, military force, and economic means. Any resistance to its control was met with force. Stamping out resistance was carried out by British troops as well as locally recruited Indian soldiers called *sepoys*. Let's look at the expansion of British control on the Indian subcontinent and the differing perspectives of the 1857 uprising by Indians against the EIC.

## Sepoy Soldiers

For a young man in India needing a decent-paying job, joining the EIC army as a sepoy would have been appealing. However, once employed he would soon be faced with racial and religious discrimination. Whether Muslim or Hindu, he and his fellow sepoys would be expected to adapt their religions and culture to the needs of the army, and they could forget about a promotion. The higher ranks were reserved for British officers. Still, sepoys were essential for expanding the domination of the East India Company across South Asia. They also were shipped abroad to expand the British Empire elsewhere.

By the mid-1800s, many Indians, including a number of sepoys, had grown more and more frustrated with living under EIC oppression. High taxes, mismanagement, racist regulations, and the continuing disrespect for local and religious customs were becoming intolerable. In 1857, a series of uprisings broke out at several military stations.

## The Spark that Lit the Fire

The first of these uprisings began in May 1857, at a military station about 40 miles outside the capital city of Delhi. Interestingly, the most heated issue had to do with ammunition and how to load a gun. Stories had been spreading that new bullet cartridges were being greased with animal fat from pigs and cows. The greased cartridges had to be opened by biting off the top. However, nearly every sepoy was either Muslim—a religion that forbids eating the fat or any other part of a pig, or Hindu—where the same rule applies to cows. Some of the sepoys, in religious observation, disobeyed orders to sink their teeth into the fat-greased ammunition. They were sent to prison.

Some sepoys rose up to free their comrades and British officers were killed in the fighting. The violence quickly spread. The next day, the sepoys reached Delhi and mobbed the British arsenal and the home of the former



*English engraving from 1857 showing mutinous sepoys dividing up spoils. Public domain.*

Mughal emperor. Rebel soldiers and anti-British civilians called for the re-instatement of the Mughal ruler who reluctantly agreed to their demands.

News spread fast, inspiring more mutinies and disturbances in districts across northern India. By the end, over 50,000 sepoys had died or were later executed, whether or not they were guilty of participating in the revolt. Another 100,000 civilians were killed by British efforts to put down the rebellion and take revenge.

Not all of India rebelled, however. Many sepoys and their units remained loyal to the British and helped to put down the revolt. From Punjab to Nepal, though, people of different religions and languages joined the uprising. When the Mughal emperor's sons were captured by the British outside Delhi, they were executed without a trial. These and other atrocities of vengeance continued across India as the British set out to punish rebels and terrorize communities that had helped them.

It took a full year for the British to put down the revolt and re-establish its control over Indian society. By 1858, the East India Company no longer governed India, and India became an official colony of the British Empire.

## Mutiny, Revolt, or War of Independence?

The revolts that took place in 1857-1858 continue to interest historians, and many still debate their causes and consequences.

Some Indian nationalists say it was an organized revolution to gain independence from British rule. It was seen as a revolt of colonial subjects against foreign imperialists. However, many scholars of Indian history interpret these events differently, arguing that India wasn't a nation yet. It had never been a fully unified state with a singular system of government, nor was there a common national identity.

Multiple reasons contributed to the rebellion against the British EIC. Some rebels fought to end the heavy tax burdens, while others were responding to new laws that forced the eviction of poor peasants from lands. Some rebels also fought to end the increasing influence of Christian missionaries.

British responses to the uprising were often racist, characterizing Indian troops as inferior and violent. British accounts from the period tended to paint Hindus and Muslims as religious fanatics. They also regarded Indian violence as a primitive impulse, rather than an understandable reaction to British oppression.



JUSTICE.

*A political cartoon from the British magazine Punch from 1857 showing the British perspective of the 1857 uprising with "Britannia"—representing Great Britain—killing the natives, justice as revenge! Public domain.*

## Outcomes and Legacies

Although the East India Company had lost its authority, Britain continued to rule India as a colony. In 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation. She promised the peoples of India that there would be no further interference in religious traditions and other matters. Nevertheless, British officials continued to distrust India's native peoples. New governing authorities created policies that insured inequality and supported racist justifications for colonial rule, or more accurately, misrule.

The British created a new system of city planning that segregated whites from native people. The bureaucracy of the state was expanded with new government offices and more policing, surveillance, and regulation of Indians. In the years to come, Indian elites would struggle for recognition and representation within the military and civil service. The British were hesitant to give recognition to people they deemed "savage" at worst, and at best "unworthy" of self-governance.

India would not gain independence from British rule until 1947.

## Whitney Howarth

Whitney Howarth, is an Associate Professor of History at Plymouth State University where she specializes in modern world history and the history of India. Dr. Howarth has taught world history at the college level since 1999 and was, for nearly a decade, a research fellow at Northeastern's World History Center, where she assisted in the research, design and creation of professional development programs for high school world history teachers, hosted seminars by top world historical scholars, and produced multi-media publications (1995-2004).

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