



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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In 1783, Great Britain was stinging from its defeat in the American Revolution (1775–1783). It had lost its 13 promising colonies there. In the aftermath, the British turned its attention to 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 indeed a business that did international trade. However, it also conquered and ruled over an increasing number of territories in India. In other words, its “business” was pretty much imperialism. “The Company,” as it was called, expanded its power and control of resources and people. Any resistance to its control was met with force. The EIC used British troops as well as locally recruited Indian soldiers called *sepoys* to stamp out resistance. Let’s look at the expansion of British control on the Indian subcontinent and the 1857 uprising by Indians against the EIC.

Sepoy Soldiers

For a young man in India needing a job, joining the EIC army would have been appealing. However, once employed as a sepoy 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. Promotion was out of the question. Higher ranks were reserved for British officers. Still, sepoys were needed for expanding EIC control across South Asia. They also were shipped abroad to expand the British Empire elsewhere.

By the mid-1800s, many Indians were frustrated with living under EIC control. High taxes, racist regulations, and the continuing disrespect for local customs were becoming unbearable. In 1857, a series of uprisings broke out at several military bases.

The spark that lit the fire

The first of these uprisings began in May 1857, at a military base 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 or Hindu. For Muslims, their religion forbids eating the fat or any other part of a pig. For Hindus, 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 sentenced to prison.

Some sepoys rose up to free their comrades and several British officers were killed. The violence quickly spread. The next day, the sepoys reached Delhi and mobbed the British arsenal. Rebel soldiers and anti-British civilians also called for the reinstatement of the former Mughal ruler who reluctantly agreed to their demands.



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

News spread fast. More mutinies and disturbances broke out 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.

That doesn't mean all of India rebelled. Many sepoys and their units remained loyal to the British and helped to put down the rebellion. 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. The EIC and its British troops set out to punish rebels and terrorize communities that had helped them.

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

Mutiny, revolt, or war of independence?

The revolts against the East India Company that took place in 1857-1858 continue to interest historians. Many of them still debate the causes and consequences of these events.

Some Indian nationalists say it was an organized revolt of colonial subjects against foreign imperialists. However, many scholars of Indian history interpret the events differently. They argue that India wasn't a nation yet. It had never been a fully unified state with a singular system of government. It did not have a common national identity.

We know that there were many reasons people rebelled against the British EIC. Some fought to end the heavy tax burdens. Others were rebelling against new laws that forced poor peasants from their lands. Some rebels fought to end the increasing influence of Christian missionaries.

British responses to the uprising were often racist. They characterized Indian troops as inferior and violent. British accounts from the period tended to paint Hindus and Muslims as religious extremists. They also regarded Indian violence as a savage impulse, rather than a response to oppression.



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

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

The British created a new system of city planning that segregated whites from Indians. The colonial government increased its policing, surveillance, and regulation of the native people it ruled. In the years to come, educated Indians would struggle for 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.

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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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. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Rebellion_of_1857#/media/File:JusticeTenniel1857Punch.jpg



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