1857 in the Nationalist Imagination

Benjamin Zachariah


Introductory Remarks

The problem of how to read the Revolt of 1857 has been a long-standing one in the historiography of India. Recent writing on 1857 has been from the perspectives opened out by ‘histories from below’ in the early 1980s. Following Eric Stokes, the question of the soldier as peasant and as rebel could not be ignored. The early practitioners of the craft of ‘subaltern history’ made something of this question, as they did of local power dynamics and everyday cultural practices. Ranajit Guha described their elementary aspects. Gautam Bhadra wrote on four rebels of 1857. Rudrangshu Mukherjee wrote on a local milieu and later on an incident of imperial outrage. Tapti Roy wrote on another local context. Military historians have used the Revolt as the implicit or explicit telos of their narratives of John Company’s army. Chris Bayly famously used 1857 as the crucial juncture of the crisis of the imperial information order and the revolt of the Native Informant.

---


3 Gautam Bhadra, ‘Four Rebels of 1857’, in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi: OUP, 1985);

4 Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt 1857-1858: a Study of Popular Resistance* (1984; new edition New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002); see his Introduction to the new edition for a recontextualising of his own contribution to the debates and those of others; in particular, his reading of Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects*.


7 Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770-1830* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), which despite the chronological framework in the title uses 1857 as its endpoint.

And yet, given its status in the historical imagination of Britain and India, writing about it has been relatively sparse. That is, except when there has been an anniversary. The 150th anniversary has provoked, inevitably, a scramble for that great date. Previous to that, a spurt of writing appeared fifty years ago in 1957. And in 1997, I was in Delhi for the 140th anniversary of the events, at a restaging of the sepoys’ march to the Red Fort, at the Red Fort itself. I even bought the t-shirt, two of them, in fact: and there were then two of us, with Bahadur Shah Zafar and the Rani of Jhansi embroidered on our breasts, walked around the old city of Delhi. Whether we succeeded in epitomising communal harmony and revolutionary vigour I cannot tell.

The occasion for this awkward and invented anniversary, ten years ahead of a conventional one, was the opportunity for underlining the allegedly non-sectarian and secular spirit of the rebels, among whom were both Hindus and Muslims, and who had appealed to the symbol of precolonial Indian sovereignty, the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, to resume actual sovereignty and provide them with the legitimacy to mount a formal challenge to Company rule. The spectres that haunted the fort and hovered in the background that winter evening in 1997 were not those of the rebels or heroes of 1857, but those of the Sangh Parivar.

We recognise that 1857 in various forms of collective imagination has come to overshadow 1857 in 1857. The ‘what happened’ questions have been overwritten by that of representations of 1857, in particular in literary and popular cultural genres from that time on. And not necessarily as Revolt or Mutiny, National War or feudal revenge, authentic subalternity or class revolt. It is now, simply as a date, a veritable cornucopia of polysemy. Much of the literature on 1857 in the aftermath of 1857, immediate and retrospective, relied on atrocity stories. Much of the literature on that literature relied on the atrocity of the atrocity.

9 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has recently surveyed the recent literature and new approaches on the 1857 Revolt. There have been several anniversary-related projects and publications, including the two conferences at which I present this paper, the paper itself, Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s books on Mangal Pandey and on the Kanpur massacres, William Dalrymple’s The Last Mughal, Tapti Roy’s The Raj of the Rani on Laxmibai, and a special issue of Bibliotheca. The contribution of Ranajoy Sen surveys a part of the academic historiography on the subject I address here, and David Lelyveld describes Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s experiences of 1857 in Bijnur.


11 See Gautam Chattopadhyay, 1857 in the British Imagination.

12 This was recognised early on when PC Joshi studied the survival of memories of the Revolt in the popular imagination: see PC Joshi, 1857 in Folk Songs.

13 It is, moreover, the single date that remains significant, although much of the Revolt occurred in 1858, and some in 1859.
stories to express outrage at the outrage expressed in the literature that the literature was writing on. There may now be outrage that there is so little outrage left to express.

The sparseness of event-centred literature could be because it is difficult to interpret 1857 with any degree of comfort if one is committed to the values of a modernising or a secular state. Events are embarrassing: was the British atrocity literature based even on the semblance of a hint of actual event-history? (British brutality, of course, is well documented and even celebrated as the appropriately and truly manly response to the cowardly natives.) And then there is the problem of placing 1857 in a narrative of national progress. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, we know, famously started the ball rolling in this debate. His association with later proto-fascist and fascist tendencies on behalf of a virulently völkisch Hindu nationalism has made much of what he said distasteful, and therefore not as canonical as it once might have been, although it might be doubted that many have actually read this hideously overwritten text overburdened with rhetorical excesses.\(^\text{14}\) Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), on the other hand, representing the good nationalism that we have come to accept as the basis of a properly inclusive Indian state ideology, was in his most famous passages of historical writing rather dismissive of 1857;\(^\text{15}\) in fact, he was more ambivalent about 1857 than the retrospective record allows for.\(^\text{16}\) The trouble with 1857 is that it inhabits inappropiable ground: a coalition of ‘backward’ elements drawn from the lower ranks of an army, elitist leaders, landowners and world-historically obsolete kings and princes were difficult to celebrate among ‘progressives’. And Indian nationalists of various types all wished to see themselves as progressives, even those nationalists we now see as somewhat backward. 1857, therefore, could be remembered as ‘the dying groans of an obsolete aristocracy and centrifugal feudalism of the medieval age.’\(^\text{17}\)

A crucial distinction should be introduced here: that between anticolonialism and nationalism. We need to maintain this distinction for ourselves, as retrospective analysts, even as we note that the difficulties of interpreting 1857 come from a desire to see the two as congruent. Anticolonialism, whether clearly articulated or implicitly present, we have been told before, was not necessarily nationalism (the 1857 rebels allegedly lacked the little something called a ‘modern’ outlook that might have qualified them as Indian nationalists).\(^\text{18}\) The corollary, that

---


\(^{15}\)Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*. See also *glimpses of indian history autobiography; discovery of India. Anniversary speeches??*  


\(^{17}\)See Guha, *Elementary Aspects*
not all Indian nationalisms were anticolonial, is seldom talked about – we are still told, however, that ‘communalist’ groups were not anticolonial, or at any rate anticolonial enough.¹⁹ Anticolonialism, then, might have been an aspect of 1857; nationalism in the sense of its late nineteenth or early twentieth century use would have been an anachronism. We need to recognise that the idea of nationalism, in order to justify popular sovereignty in the face of the sovereignty of the monarch, was an innovation whose international acceptance was relatively late: it was not before the Bolshevik Revolution and Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points that ‘national self-determination’ became widely acknowledged as the language of legitimacy in which claims to collective political existence had to be made. Anticolonialism, a much more amorphous and pre-ideological configuration or collection of sentiments, movements, ideas, without typologies or predictable form, has by comparison been subject to the enormous condescension of posterity.

But the clarity of this distinction is a retrospective and analytic one, rather than a contemporaneous and subjectively experienced one. And it is a distinction that most historians do not make. There still seems to be a need to seek the ‘precursors’ of the Indian nation, so that the ‘Indian nation’ has a longer genealogy than simply a colonial one: as if the acknowledgement that ‘nation’ is a relatively recent concept is embarrassing. 1857 might thus serve a proto-national purpose even if it is, in the end, the wrong sort of nationalism, thereby giving the Indian nation a pre-colonial history and a non-colonial ‘modernity’ (since nationalism is a modern idea); and giving nationalism itself a non-‘Western’ genealogy.²⁰

Nationalism, History and Memory
This is a paper, once again, not on event-history, but of readings of a set of events that loomed large in the imagination of empire and colony alike. It is about that awkward space in the intersection of history and collective memory that is the setting up of national lieux de memoire,²¹ in Pierre Nora’s phrase: ‘realms of memory’ or (the translation I prefer) ‘sites of memory’, in the English translation, and Erinnerungsorte in the available German translation.²² The customary form of such sites is concrete: Denkmäler, monuments, sites of

¹⁹ We might recall, for instance, the recent debates on the towards freedom volumes – see Vinay Lal, The History of History for an account
²⁰ For the use of this argument by a historian of India who is not an Indian nationalist, see CA Bayly, Origins of Nationality in India: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); CA Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World (2002). But for precolonial proto-nations more generally, see Rajat Kanta Ray, The Felt Community; Irfan Habib (ed), etc…
²¹ Pierre Nora, Les lieux de memoire.
²² Etienne Francois and Hagen Schulze (ed), Deutsche Erinnerungsorte (Munich: Beck, 2005).
memory or mourning. But they could also be more abstract: ways of interpreting historical events, the construction of an archive, the disciplined remembering of particular collective subjectivities recast as national history.

According to Nora, ‘There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory’. For Nora, of course, there is a distinction between ‘real memory’, which is ‘social and unviolated’ and exemplified by ‘primitive and archaic’ societies, pre-‘national’ societies; and ‘history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organise the past.’ He believes that ‘archaic’ societies have an ‘unself-conscious’ and uncritical, but therefore more authentic, ‘memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents traditions, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes origins, and myth’ – and he insists on this as pre-national and non-modern. Very strange indeed is this distinction, for he could equally be providing a commentary on modern nationalism. He maintains the old distinction between pre-historical and historical societies in a way that has long been associated with colonial knowledge-forms: ‘Among the new nations, independence has swept into history societies newly awakened from their ethnological slumbers by colonial violation’. (It is, incidentally, something that seems to go without saying that ‘sites of memory’ will be national ones, which begs the question as to what social or institutional forms work towards the founding of these sites. What makes something successfully become a national site of memory? In what ways are these sites contested?)

Nora’s claim of the ‘fundamental opposition’ in modern times of memory and history does not hold: ‘memory is life’, while ‘history … is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer’. He goes on, invoking Maurice Halbwachs, to say that memory serves the purpose of binding a group together; ‘there are as many memories as there are groups’; and history is hostile to memory in this sense and seeks to destroy it. Nora’s

---

23 Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning
26 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, 8.
27 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, 8.
29 Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, 8.
30 See Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory (1968): his theorisation dates from 1925. Halbwachs was a student of Emile Durkheim’s.
problematisation, then, if I were to be allowed to rephrase it, is that of an anxiety about a loss of memory that has to be concretely embodied in some form of monumentalisation, in a society now under the tyranny of history, ‘for anchoring its memory’.  

However, Nora’s key distinction, that between history and memory in modern times, between the authentic and subjective place of memory on the one hand, and history as the enemy of these subjectivities on the other, is one that Nora himself does not accept in practice, though he requires it analytically. (He sees the role, for instance, of historiographical critique, as history discovering where and when it has become a ‘victim of memories’ that are ‘alien impulses within itself’, and he therefore implicitly situates history as a constant striving for objectivity, an ambition that he later acknowledges the discipline has now abandoned in favour of an explicit acceptance of positionality and the politics thereof.) Freed from the ‘buttresses’ of lieu de memoire, and left to survive in the hostile wild outside world of history, memory would be swept away by history. So: ‘... we must deliberately create archives…’, Nora says at one point, in order to preserve memory against the onslaught of history. And this, he goes on to affirm, is an attempt of memory to become history: ‘The quest for memory is a search for one’s history.’ Such memory is now a new kind of memory: ‘Modern memory is, above all, archival’; it is not spontaneous, pre-modern or archaic. Or of course, since neither abstraction is an agent, is this not an example of the contestation over the category history that Nora correctly sees as a legitimating one in modern times? The individual must take responsibility for remembering ‘his’ or ‘her’ history and becomes a ‘memory-individual’ – the (non-practicing) Jew whose Jewishness consists in remembering he is a Jew – and as we now historicise memory itself, and the historian acknowledges his complicity with memory, the historian becomes, in himself, a lieu de memoire.

To the questions ‘Can there really be a collective history? Or is collective memory a better term?’ we must therefore pose the further question: why must memory be presented as history? Because the legitimising role of history is immense: it is, for that reason, modern. Both history and modernity are legitimising categories that a national argument cannot do

---

31 Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, 9. Nora, situating himself in a (French) nationalist tradition, believes that once, during the Third Republic, history was expected to serve national memory – a time when many of the lieu de memoire he speaks of – the Arc de Triomphe, the Dictionnaire Larousse – were brought into being.
32 Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, 10-12.
33 Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, 10, 18.
34 Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, 12.
without. Or in other words, what if a group – seeking to create solidarity – wishes to legitimise its memory as history? Which is of course the point many historians of nationalism have made: that nationalism writes its history backwards, narrates its nationness retrospectively.

In the case of 1857, monuments in a concrete sense do not serve this collective purpose; there are a few of these sparsely dotted around our urban landscapes, but do monuments properly function without a prior or simultaneous metanarrative, however incoherent, of the significance of the events that they attempt to embody? Perhaps there is a case for thinking in terms of more abstract sites of memory: collective memory not directly experienced, but handed down so as to apparently be collectively, and intersubjectively, personal. But we must further note that such memory is not archaic; and that it is often – though not always – in the service of a national cause. Nationalism provides a rubric of disciplined identities through which memories are themselves disciplined; and Dalit invocations of 1857\textsuperscript{36} or folk ballads\textsuperscript{37} can invoke identities that are less or more than national, but must be incorporated into the national to obtain their legitimacy.\textsuperscript{38}

It should be noted that 1857 provides a site of memory for both the former colonised and the former coloniser. ‘Popular cognisance of the modern history of the Indian subcontinent is limited’, Eric Stokes wrote in the early 1980s, and speaking of Britain, of course, ‘… to three episodes dignified by the names of “Clive”, “the Mutiny”, and “Gandhi”’.\textsuperscript{39} The question is whether this lack of detailed understanding, this absence of what professionals might describe as historical accuracy, makes any difference when we are speaking about how historical events become sites of memory – the cinematic success of Amir Khan’s Mangal Pandey being a case in point. ‘[I]n certain respects, the past is up for grabs’, as one writer put it. ‘It is really the meaning of the past that is of issue.’\textsuperscript{40} This is of course especially important in terms of direct personal involvement (by now inapplicable to 1857) or collective remembering that provides a collective belonging, which of course assumes an identification with a past that is indeed remembered collectively, as belonging in some sense to ‘us’.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{36}{Badri Narayan...}
\footnotetext{37}{PC Joshi, 1857 in Folk Songs}
\footnotetext{38}{On the legitimacy of nationalism as a paradigm for collective identities see my argument in ‘Paradigms Lost, Paradigms Regained’, Kuruvilla Zachariah Memorial Lecture, Presidency College, Calcutta, February 142006 (Calcutta, 2007).}
\footnotetext{39}{Eric Stokes, The Peasant Armed, p. 1.}
\end{footnotes}
Histories, for over a century now, since the paradigm of the ‘national’ became (relatively) hegemonic in terms of its legitimating role for collective political and social existence, have been national histories even when they haven’t. It is in this situation that 1857 proves defective in India. In terms of attempting to provide the Revolt with a successful place in a relatively coherent version of an official nationalist ideology, Indian nationalists were faced with a tricky problem: neither fully canonised nor properly disavowed, 1857 inhabits this peculiar space of nonbelonging hovering on the brink of belonging.

Such a situation was best illustrated in 1957, on the 100th anniversary of the Revolt. The Foreword to the officially commissioned centenary history of the revolt, Surendra Nath Sen’s *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, was written not by Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister and habitual commentator on matters historical, but by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) [then Education Minister?]. Azad’s piece, sixteen pages long and divided into several subsections, was a careful analysis of the historiography of the Revolt, demonstrating an impressive scholarship and an impressive engagement with the scholarship then extant. He claimed credit himself for having commissioned Sen’s book. He pointedly said that prior to this, ‘no objective history of the struggle had yet been written’ – a remark that provoked Susobhan Chandra Sarkar’s wry remark that ‘Indian historical scholarship is still obsessed with the ghost of Ranke’. (This is incidentally an indication of how seriously Susobhanbabu was willing to take the Maulana’s claim to historical scholarship.) ‘Dr. Sen’, Azad wrote approvingly, ‘has treated the subject objectively and dispassionately’. There had been, despite his being an officially sponsored history, ‘no attempt to interfere with his work or influence his conclusions.’ Azad’s stress on objectivity, which of course sounds strange to those of us trained in the post-1960s or at least post-1980s historical profession, was a matter of some concern. He conceded that ‘an objective history of the uprising was more difficult to write before India became free’, but believed that in a hundred years the passions raised by the events should have lost their hold. Then he proceeded himself to write the emotive

---

44 A large amount of space in the review is spent discussing Maulana Azad’s comments on objectivity: ‘It is idle to pretend that one can shake off such points of view’ – and challenges Azad’s claim that all of India had deep loyalty to the Mughal court. Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 116.
Alongside the question of how to place 1857 in a national history, we might wish to consider the trajectories of the category ‘national’ as a legitimating category. 1857 was nine years after the ‘springtime of the peoples’ that was the 1848 revolutions in Europe, where the national principle resurfaced after a long underground existence under the Concert of Europe; it was, therefore, a radical idea whose incorporation into the language of resistance in India, such as it existed at the time, was gradual. By the turn of the century, Indians engaged with the writings of Mazzini and celebrated the unification of Italy and the political economy of Germany. In the early twentieth century, all legitimate arguments about collective political existence and expression had to be made in terms of the national principle; but even before its moment of universal acknowledgement, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Wilson’s Fourteen Points, its obsolete nature or at least its obsolescence was already being proclaimed.\textsuperscript{48}

This paper presents for the consideration of this audience three readings of 1857, each at different points of this chronology of the national principle as legitimating category: that of Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), retrospectively anointed author of a ‘two-nation theory’, and therefore a ‘forefather’ of Pakistani nationalism; of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), the central spokesman for a Hindu nationalism that is generally considered fascist or proto-fascist, but into which his foundational, and in its times very influential text fits with difficulty; and that of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), founder of a ‘Nehruvian’ nationalism that seeks a tolerant, secular society of collective belonging in India. The three moments are useful: Sir Saiyid is only retrospectively a nationalist of any kind: he makes no use of the terms ‘nation’ or ‘national’, preferring ‘native’, by which he means both Hindu and Muslim inhabitants of India; and his crucial distinction is between Hindus and Muslims, which for him are not ‘nations’. Savarkar’s reading uses the national category as central; but even as he invokes Mazzini and the joint national belonging of Hindus and Muslims in India, he requires the nation to maintain its sacred (Hindu and Muslim, and sometimes Sikh) character. Nehru’s nationalism, on the other hand, as I have argued elsewhere, is not properly

\textsuperscript{48} Part of my wider argument in Playing the Nation Game (forthcoming)
a nationalism, for if nationalism is that which seeks to delineate proper belonging by demarcating who belongs and who doesn’t, Nehruvian nationalism refuses to do this.\textsuperscript{49}

In analysing these three narratives, I hope to illustrate the difficulties of finding a coherent and inclusive nationalism; and indeed, to point out the impossibility of any nationalism to find a version that is truly inclusive. For nationalism, by definition, is a sectarian form of delineating identity. We need to understand how identities formed via \textit{actually experienced solidarities} are encouraged or disciplined to make the imaginative jump to ‘nationalism’; or alternatively, how they fail to do so.

\textbf{Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan’s 1857}

Sir Saiyid’s narrative, as he presents it to us in the pamphlet \textit{The Causes of the Indian Revolt} is, for us, perhaps of interest because he was an eye-witness: he lived through the events of 1857. He saw the British (brutish) revenge in Delhi. [I followed the Word programme’s spelling suggestion here – British and brutish being synonymous in this instance.] He himself sheltered some British refugees from the events. Nonetheless he lost his uncle and cousin; an aunt died of thirst and his mother died soon after despite having been rescued. Still he insisted on a loyalist position, arguing only that an Indian representative in the Legislative Council could have provided the Government with enough indigenous information to prevent the events from having happened.\textsuperscript{50} He maintained a resolutely \textit{Sharif} point of view; in his treatment, Indian converts to Islam are foreign to his concerns because they are not of the ruling elite who came from without. He insists on the pride of Muslims as a former ruling elite. He criticises land revenue policy largely on the grounds that the old landed elite has suffered, though he knows in the abstract that peasants have also suffered.\textsuperscript{51} The pamphlet was published immediately after the Revolt. 500 copies were printed, addressed to the Government. Most copies were sent to England; it was written in Urdu, and only translated into English and published in 1873.\textsuperscript{52} The original context for Sir Saiyid’s intervention, it should thus be noted, was (if we phrase this in terms of a language of retrospective academic

\textsuperscript{49} Benjamin Zachariah, ‘Paradigms Lost, Paradigms Regained’, Kuruvilla Zachariah Memorial lecture, February 14, 2006; also Benjamin Zachariah, \textit{Nehru}, Interlude.
\textsuperscript{50} Causes, p 12.
\textsuperscript{51} Robinson, intro, p xiv.
\textsuperscript{52} The Causes of the Indian Revolt, intro. By Francis Robinson.
debate) his attempt to claim for himself the status of privileged native informant to the
Government, rather than to participate in any form of public debate.53

Sir Saiyid was of course arguing against the British view that it was mainly Muslims who
were involved in the revolt. Muslims, through him, he believed, had to prove their loyalty.
Among other things, he insisted that it was the British that had created solidarity between
Hindus and Muslims by putting them in the same regiments, thereby creating unity between
‘two antagonistic races’.54 Even by the standards of the time, this is embarrassingly loyalist,
although loyalism is of course a position that must be maintained to remain within a
legitimate political language in any communication with the official hierarchies of the
colonial state, and loyalism is itself subject to ambiguous feelings. As a result, of course,
ambiguities in attitudes to or support for the Revolt must be read against other forms of
communication to different audiences. The pamphlet starts by suggesting that much of the
need to place the matter of the causes of the Revolt on record is now obsolete, since the
takeover by the Crown and the crowning glory of Queen Victoria as the monarch for India has
actually already led to deliverance.55

Sir Saiyid was no supporter of popular protest:

‘It must be remembered that the men who in those times raised so loud the cry of
“jehad” were vagabonds and ill-conditioned men. They were wine drinkers and men
who spent their time in debauchery and dissipation. They were men floating without
profession or occupation on the surface of society. Can such fellows as these be
called leaders of a religious war? It was very little that they thought about religion.
Their only object was to plunder Government Treasuries and to steal Government
property. To be faithless to one’s salt is to dis-regard [sic] the first principles of our
religion. To slaughter innocents, especially women, children and old men would be
accounted abo-minable [sic]’56

According to Sir Saiyid, The alleged *fatwa* of Delhi that had proclaimed *jehad* on behalf of
the emperor was according to him a forgery. Many Delhi *maulvis* regarded the emperor as a

---

53 On the colonial information order and the relative importance of the native informant and his (lack of)
agency, see CA Bayly, *Empire and Information* versus Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; see also Michael
Dodson; the subtlest writings on this theme remain those of Bernard Cohn.
54 Robinson intro pxii.
55 Causes, p. 1.
56 Khan, causes, P 8.
heretic and did not even offer prayers in the Jama Masjid because they refused to pray in mosques under the Emperor’s patronage.\footnote{Causes, pp 9-10.}

He argued that a representative voice of Indians in the Legislative Council was important. Even this was a very limited argument.

‘To form a Parliament from the natives of India is of course out of the question. It is not only impossible, but useless. There is no reason however why the natives of this country should be excluded from the Legislative Council.’\footnote{Causes, p 13.}

Doesn’t say why it is useless. But it is a conduit of information to government to have Indians in the Council. Without it there was the tendency of Indians to mistrust government-made laws, too. However good the intention of the laws – and sir saiyid is very quick to concede these good intentions – the people would fail to be convinced of this.

‘At length the Hindustanees fell into the habit of thinking that all the laws were passed with a view to degrade and ruin them, and to deprive them and their fellows of their religion. Such acts as were repugnant to native customs and character, whether in themselves good or bad, increased this suspicion.’\footnote{Causes, p 14.}

Here at least, Sir Saiyid is in consonance with Savarkar. Who puts it more strongly; the English had no right to interfere with the customs of the country. Savarkar said that it was not a question of whether the Company’s laws were good or bad; neither Muslim nor Hindu knew where the ‘attack on their religions customs would stop’.\footnote{Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, pp. 57-8.} Abolition of Suttee, the Company’s prisoners prevented from observing their religions, the Widow Remarriage Act passed by Canning, followed by a law for the aboliton of polygamy brought before the Legislative Council – all these were examples for Savarkar of English ‘insolence born of unbridled power’\footnote{Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, p. 57.} Sir Saiyid, as a loyalist, put it more gently. Interference in matters of religion made everyone believe that the government ‘intended to force the Christian religion and foreign customs upon Hindu and Mussulman alike.’\footnote{Causes, p 16.}

Complains of missionary proselytising and says that it appeared to people that the government was sponsoring and supporting missionary activities. Such appearances were given credence
by details such as the decision to raise orphans in the Christian faith after the 1837 drought in the North-West Province. (17-18)

Missionary proselytising:

‘They took to printing and circulating controversial tracts, in the shape of questions and answers. Men of a different faith were spoken of in those tracts in a most offensive and irritating way. In Hindustan these things have always been managed very differently. Everyman in this country, preaches and explains his views in his own mosque, or his own house. If anyone wishes to listen to him, he can go to the mosque, or house, and hear what he has to say. But [the Missionaries]… In violent and unmeasured language they attacked the followers and the holy places of other creeds; annoying, and insulting beyond expression the feelings of those who listened to them.’

Complains about all forms of missionary activity including schools.

Slips into talking about education policy in general. Unveiled girls in schools – perception that girls were deliberately being unveil or encouraged to unveil themselves at schools. ‘obnoxious … to the feelings of the Hindustanees’. The large colleges in the cities also cause of suspicion. At first these were unfounded, and Islamic learning plus Arabic and Persian were not neglected, so religious leaders supported the learning of English among other things. Then Arabic and Persian learning was being replaced by Urdu and English – Urdu clearly regarded as inferior although he wrote his pamphlet in Urdu. (21).

Sir Saiyid was also sensitive to Hindu feelings. In jails, there was one cook in some cases. This was against the feelings of caste Hindus. Not actually against the muhammedan creed, but still it was annoying to them as well. (22).

It isn’t really a pamphlet on the causes of the Revolt. A compendium of thoughts on what might annoy elite Indians, Hindus as well as Muslims. The Revolt is the excuse for writing about them. Acute on questions of interference with practices of property inheritance for converts, regulations on Hindu widow remarriage. Then on dispossession of traditional landlords for non-payment of arrears, etc. One suspects that he knew as little about the deeper causes of 1857 as Queen Victoria or Disraeli.
Crux of argument about difference between Hindus and Muslims – pp 34-5. Would be a good colonial ethnography of India. Government does not know its subjects. He, Sir Saiyid, does, and can teach the government to know them too.

Among Indian grievances he mentions the drying up of jobs under the British, and he says this affected Muslims more than Hindus.

‘It must be borne in mind that the Hindoos, the original inhabitants of the country, were never in former days in the habit of taking service, but on the contrary they were each engaged in such work as their forefathers had been engaged in before them. The Brahmins never took service, the Vaishyas were always traders and bankers, the Kshatriyas, once lords of the land, never took service, but each kept his own small portion of land, dividing it amongst his kinsmen and preserving a semblance of authority. They had no standing army, but as occasion required they all united either to resist or to invade as the case might be … There was one caste certainly that did take service and these were the “Kayasths”.’

And then:

‘The Muhammadans are not the aborigines of this country. They came in the train of former conquerors and gradually domesticated themselves in India. They were therefore all dependent on service, and on account of this increased difficulty in obtaining the same, they, far more than the Hindoos, were put to much inconvenience and misery. An honourable military service, distinct from that eagerly engaged in by the lower classes of the community, was with difficulty procurable under the British Government.’

In many ways this is the lament of the old Mughal elite, disempowered in relative terms after the failure of the Revolt. Somewhat like the Nehru family’s history. Mughal service elite defending its ethos. The emperor himself is not integral to this; Sir Saiyid dismisses him as a senile old man who did not know what he was doing.

Never uses the word ‘nation’ or ‘nations’. ‘Natives’ is his preferred term. An indication that the argument about ‘nations’ is not yet a central legitimating argument, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolt. And the language of ‘nations’ is not yet ready for use in this manner: in passages from the writings of Marx and Engels, contemporary observers of the events, ‘race’, ‘nation’ and ‘religion’ are used as broadly synonymous:

65 Causes pp 34-5
66 Causes p 35.
‘The outrages committed by the revolted sepoys in India are indeed appalling, hideous, ineffable – such as one is prepared to meet only in wars of insurrection, of nationalities, of races, and above all of religion … However infamous the conduct of the sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India …’  

Injury to elite pride. A petty British official thinks of himself as higher than the highest native gentleman. In his view there is no such thing as a native gentleman. This is reprehensible, and since most Indians see government through these officials, it seems that all government has the same attitude. Sir Saiyid leaves open the possibility that the real government, that is, the higher-up government, recognises of course that there are such things as native gentlemen. (41-42.)

Muhammedans seek honour, not money. And they were once exalted. Teaches the British the virtues of Mughal practice: regular durbars so that the ruled could get a glimpse of the ruler, who had to befit the title of the shadow of god on earth. 45-46. Finally a rejoicing that Queen Victoria recognises the principle. The people rejoiced. 46.

Did Disraeli read this pamphlet? A good lesson in inventing traditions.

Laced with biblical quotations.

On military matters: the English made the mistake of having joint regiments of Hindus and Muslims. ‘constant intercourse had done its work and the two races had almost become one’. [this is a quasi-national argument, were he to regard the outcome as desirable; he doesn’t]. ‘It is but natural and to be expected, that a feeling of friendship and brotherhood must spring up between the men of a regiment, constantly brought together as they are. They consider themselves as one body and thus it was that the difference which exists between Hindoos and Muhammadans had, in these regiments, been almost entirely smoothed away.’

Clearly a mistake: he echoes ARISTOTLE’S famous argument about keeping the body of slaves diverse so that they cannot make common cause, but in reverse: that keeping diverse sepoys together creates a common cause. Nadir Shah after conquering Khorasan made sure that he kept the Persian and Afghan sides of his army separate and of equal strength. P 50.

---


68 Causes. P 50.
‘If separate regiments of Hindoos and separate regiments of Muhammadans had been raised, this feeling of brotherhood could not have arisen and, in my opinion, the Muhammadan regiments would not have refused to receive the new cartridges.’ (51).

In this, and in the section on the grievances of the army, Sir Saiyid is most speculative, and there is no indication how he would have had more information than the British government who sought to make enquiries in this regard.

**Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s 1857**

History of the text itself interesting. Written in exile in Europe, about 1908 when Savarkar was about 24 years old. Research at the India Office Library. Written in Marathi. Smuggled into India and then, when police attempted to seize the manuscript, smuggled out again. Translated by various volunteers a chapter at a time, separately, with no attempt to standardise style. Manuscript in the keeping of Madame Bhikhaji Cama in Paris, who died during the First World War, and the manuscript, in a bank vault that only she knew of, vanished.

All we have, therefore, is the strange English translation, which appeared in various illicit and promptly banned versions, the first legal version appearing in India in January 1947. The original publishers of the illegal 1909 version even apologised for the style, not to Indian readers, for whom style allegedly was not the important point, but ‘to those sympathetic foreign readers who might be inclined to read this book.’

This is a period of undifferentiated ‘terrorist’ politics: Indians in Europe, America or Bengal had not yet clearly differentiated into left and right, and this was epitomised by the diversity of the circles that grew up around Shamji Krishnavarma and his journal, the *Indian Sociologist*, in Europe, or around Lala Lajpat Rai in his American years. To pin Savarkar down in this period as already a fascist would therefore give him the credit of being one of the founders of that ideology. This may well be the case, if we are to take a less Eurocentric and success-centric view of fascism, but then Savarkar would hardly have been alone in this period.

---

70 Savarkar, 1857, p. xxii.
Savarkar’s opening remarks.

‘The nation that has no consciousness of its past has no future. Equally true it is that a nation must develop its capacity not only of claiming a past but also of knowing how to use it for the furtherance of its future.’\(^{71}\)

The author makes no apology for the instrumental nature of the history:

‘The nation ought to be the master and not the slave of its own history. For, it is absolutely unwise to try to do certain things now irrespective of special considerations, simply because they had been once acted in the past. The feeling of hatred against the Mahomedans was just and necessary in the times of Shivaji – but, such a feeling would be unjust and foolish if nursed now, simply because it was the dominant feeling of the Hindus then.’\(^{72}\)

So the Savarkar problem is related to what to do about Muslims while using the rhetoric of the sacred and holy war by Hindus to purify themselves and their nation. For the purposes of this text, some Muslims at least can be admitted to the nation.

His narrative is that of the careful and well-planned uprising, scheduled for 31\(^{st}\) May, being upset by the overeager Sepoys starting things up too early due to an understandably virile, manly patriotism that caused them to act prematurely.

‘Mangal Pandey was a Brahmin by birth. He took up the duties of a Kshatriya and was a valiant young soldier. Into the heart of this young and brilliant Brahmin who loved religion more than his life, and who was pure in his private life and undaunted in battle, the idea of the freedom of his country had entered and electrified his blood. How could his sword be patient? The swords of martyrs never are.’\(^{73}\)

The association of virility and premature activity may be an unfortunate one; it is something that Savarkar seems keen on. The destiny of the high caste is also very important in this narrative. Rhetorically, the overuse of the phrase ‘Maro feringheeko’ marks this text. Allegedly this was what crowds shouted at various stages of the Revolt.

The contention that the Revolt was to avenge the defeat at the Battle of Plassey is also central to his narrative. Takes very seriously that rumour which was reportedly circulating, that

\(^{71}\) Savarkar, 1857, introduction, p. xxiii.

\(^{72}\) Savarkar, 1857, introduction, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

\(^{73}\) Savarkar, War of Independence, pp 104-5.
British rule would last 100 years from the battle of Plassey, 23 June 1757, and treats it as the basis of the plot – which, however, was scheduled not for 23 June but for 31 May.

But he has the prophets of modern nationalism to invoke. Mazzini appears as a legitimating character in the script. ‘Mazzini, in a critical article on Carlyle’s French Revolution, has said that every revolution must have had a fundamental principle. Revolution is a complete rearrangement in the life of historic man. A revolutionary movement cannot be based on a flimsy and momentary grievance. It is always due to some all-moving principle … As in private life, so also in history, the deeds of an individual or a nation are judged by the character of the motive.’

The sacred motives of 1857, allegedly, and thus the motifs of Savarkar’s script, are the principles of Swadharma and Swaraj. Trivialities like greased cartridges were, he says, far too petty motives for Nana Sahib, the Emperor of Delhi, the Queen of Jhansi, or Khan Bahadur Khan of Rohillkhand. (5). Indeed, these figures are the heroes of the plot, which lays him open to the charge of glorifying feudal heroes. He also has a rather patronising view of the masses, and in many cases the ordinary sepoy appears as brave and patriotic, but somewhat stupid, leaving the heroic roles to be played by those clearly of noble blood.

Reflections on causality require him to distinguish between ‘real causes and motives’ and ‘temporary and accidental causes’. (6-7) ‘The kidnapping of Sita was only the incidental cause of the fight between Rama and Ravana. The real causes were deeper and more inward.’ (7). ‘The seed of the Revolution of 1857 is in this holy inspiring idea, clear and explicit, propounded from the throne of Delhi, THE PROTECTION OF RELIGION AND COUNTRY.’ (8). ‘At least, orientals have never had the idea that Swadharma and Swaraj have no connection with each other. The Eastern mind has maintained a full and traditional belief, as is also said by Mazzini, that there is no vast barrier between Heaven and earth, but that the two are ends of one and the same thing.’ (10).

Much of the point of the narrative is in its rhetoric, so I shall not attempt to paraphrase too much.

---

74 Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence* p. 3.
‘The war fought for Swadharma and Swaraj does not lose its lustre by defeat. The splendour of Guru Govind Singh’s life is none the less, because his efforts did not immediately succeed at the time. Nor do we think the less of the rising of 1848 in Italy, because the Revolution failed completely at that time.’

These are two bright pearls in the necklace of Mother India. Now, when dark night has overspread the horizon of the whole country, these two alone are shining as luminous stars. They are fiery Akalis ready to avenge their country’s unjust wrongs with the last drop of their blood. They are two martyrs sacrificing their lives for Country, Religion and Freedom. They are two witnesses, sword in hand, to prove that the blood of Hindusthan that gave birth to Shivaji is not yet dead.’ (25).

And so on. Speaking of Nana Sahib and Lakshmi Bai. Azimullah Khan, of humble origin but his talent recognised by Nana Sahib. His visit to Britain on behalf of Nana Sahib to advocate his recognition despite his being adopted. Allegedly at the same time Rango Bapuji the Brahmin from Satara was also in London; in Savarkar’s account they plotted the Revolt together in London. (33-4). And Azimullah’s ‘spirited mien and Oriental magnificence’ caused many ‘English women of respectable families’ to become ‘infatuated’ with him. (33) Nana Sahib is his central figure, in his Marathanness. ‘What did the portrait of Chhatrapati Shivaji say to him?’ (p 35) His noble birth: (an adopted son… slight problem.) (p 35)

It is Nana Sahib who has the foresight to see Muslims as assimilable to ‘Hindusthan’:

‘He [Nana Sahib], also, felt that the meaning of “Hindusthan” was thereafter the united nation of the adherents of Islam as well as Hinduism. As long as the Mahomedans lived in India in the capacity of the alien rulers, so long, to be willing to live with them like brothers was to acknowledge national weakness. Hence, it was, up to then, necessary for the Hindus to consider the Mahomedans as foreigners. And moreover this rulership of the Mahomedans, Guru Govind in the Panjab, Rana Pratap in Rajputana, Chhatrasal in Bundelkhand, and the Maharattas by even sitting upon the throne at Delhi, had destroyed; and, after a struggle of centuries, Hindu sovereignty had defeated the rulership of the Mahomedans and had come to its own all over India. It was no national shame to join hands with Mahomedans then, but it would, on the contrary, be an act of generosity. So, now, the original antagonism between the Hindus and the Mahomedans might be consigned to the Past. Their present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreigner and native, but simply that of brothers with the one difference between them of religion alone. For, they were both children of the soil of Hindusthan … all children of the same Mother.’ (75-6)

stereotypical synecdochic histories: figures personify virtue:

‘And when the English had begun to take up the role of an Aurangzeb, there was no remedy other than that India must produce a Shivaji or a Guru Govind.’ (58).
The Marathas lived up to Shivaji in their participation in the Revolt; the Sikhs betrayed Guru Govind in their non-participation – that is another theme running through the book.

Clearly a war of religion, which is in India not separate from a war of national independence. Makes much of British insults to Indian religions. ‘The Koran and the Vedas were openly defiled and images were desecrated!’ (60).

Chapati rumours, lotus rumours, evidence of organisation. Azimullah and Nana Sahib set off together to tour the country in March 1857, allegedly, so they said, on a pilgrimage. Which, says Savarkar, was obviously a pretext for the furthering of the plot. ‘Indeed! A Brahmin and a Moslem are starting together, arm in arm, to visit the holy, religious places, - an event without a precedent!’ (95).

The Chapatis were the Angel of Revolution:

‘Speed on, Angel of Revolution, speed on! Go thou forth to preach the Gospel to all the dear children of India, that the country is ready for a holy war to make everyone [sic] of them free.’ (97) ‘Invite the spears of the Mahrattas, the swords of the Rajputs, the Kirpan of the Sikhs, the Crescent of the Islamites’ …. (98).

The inflammatory nature of this book is in its keeping alive the memories of British atrocities in the Mutiny, and justifying the violence of the rebels. Savarkar’s resort to comparative history is not to be faulted. The argument is simple: some rebel leaders wished to have mercy on the whites at their disposal. But ordinary people were not willing to see this: if you do not kill a snake, it will strike you later. And this is what happened in the instances where the rebels spared the lives of English people. His account of the Kanpur massacre only barely manages to deplore the excesses of the sepoys: the tone is celebratory, even though he says that Nana Sahib did not condone the massacre, he sees it as inadequate revenge for General Neill’s sacking of Delhi. ‘The whole Ganges became red.’ (235)

Violence to combat injustice.
So Charles I’s beheading ‘is a just deed’ (274) ‘Hindustan’ did not go to the extent of Cromwell’s Irish massacres (277)
Etc.
The historical accuracy of the text is of course seriously flawed. Savarkar takes the conspiracy theories of British officials and writers and turns them into evidence for concerted national action; thus, this might be considered an early version of Ranajit Guha’s method of reading against the grain, as advocated in ‘the prose of counter-insurgency’.\(^{75}\) Accuracy is not the issue here: how can the events be translated into a rallying cry for the ‘nation’? There is a passage on ignorant Punjabi sepoys not quite recognising the nature of British rule, and therefore not joining the rebellion. (144)

Admittedly, 1857 showed that India was not yet a united nation. But this is a lack that others have managed to overcome. The ‘great and compact nations of the world’ had all passed through their periods of disunity: Italy, Germany, or England under the Romans and the Saxons. ‘But who can deny that the above countries have now united their several peoples into strong and powerful nations today, because they had been melted in the furnace of internal strife and the fire of foreign despotism?’ (144).

The restoration of the Mughal emperor at Delhi was not a restoration. The Mughal dynasty was an invading one. The appeal to the emperor was fundamentally new. The people had declared that ‘the longstanding war between the Hindu and the Mahomedan had ended, that tyranny had cased, and that the people of the soil were once more free to choose their own monarch.’ (285). Otherwise ‘the blood of hundreds of Hindu martyrs’ who had fought the Muslim invaders would have been shed in vain. (284).

**Jawaharlal Nehru’s 1857**

Indian history in contemporary times written from British sources and perspectives. ‘The very circumstances of defeat and disruption prevented the Indian side of the story from being properly recorded, and many of the records that existed suffered destruction during the great Revolt of 1857. They remained dispersed, little known, and many perished in the manuscript stage from the incursion of termites and other insects which abound in the country.’\(^{76}\)

Also foreshadowing Guha’s ‘the prose of counter-insurgency’, Nehru wrote that ‘the villain of the British in India is often a hero to Indians, and those whom the British have delighted to


honour and reward are often traitors and quislings in the eyes of the great majority of the Indian People. That taint clings to their descendants.’

The policy of direct annexation by the British was abandoned after the Revolt in favour of the earlier subsidiary alliance system.

‘Except for some minor defections the Indian princes not only remained aloof from the rising, but, in some instances, actually helped the British to crush it. This brought about a change in British policy towards them, and it was decided to keep them and even to strengthen them.’

On Paramountcy.

‘Some of the princes are good, some are bad; even the good ones are thwarted and checked at every turn. As a class they are of necessity backward, feudal in outlook, and authoritarian in methods, except in their dealings with the British Government, when they show a becoming subservience.’

Feudalism, Princes, loyalty, Revolt.

‘The Revolt of 1857-58 was essentially a feudal rising, though there were some nationalist elements in it.’ (327).

His narrative of the events:

Much of India had come to terms with British rule, not so in ‘the upper provinces’ where ‘the spirit of revolt was growing, especially among the feudal chiefs and their followers’. The masses were discontented and ‘intensely anti-British’, – this for Nehru is not to be applauded even when understandable because he believed that racialism ought not to be a feature of anticolonial struggle – in 1942, he claimed (though not with great accuracy), there was no such racial feeling. And they suffered because officials were rapacious and ignorant. And the upper classes were resentful of ‘the insulting and overbearing manners of the foreigners’

The Revolt:

77 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (1946), p. 290.
78 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (1946), p. 312.
79 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (1946), p. 322.
80 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (1946), p. 487.
‘Essentially it was a feudal outburst, headed by feudal chiefs and their followers and aided by the widespread anti-foreign sentiment. Inevitably it looked up to the relic of the Mughal dynasty, still sitting in the Delhi palace, but feeble and old and powerless.’

Is this in contradiction to what he says earlier in the same paragraph?

‘In May, 1857, the Indian army at Meerut mutinied. The revolt had been secretly and well organised but a premature outburst rather upset the plans of the leaders. It was much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian independence.’

It is a line that Maulana Azad, writing eleven years later, explicitly rejects: that it was organised and coordinated and went wrong. But Nehru is close in these passages to the Savarkar line on this. Nehru has to be positive about signs of popular participation, though he recognised its limitations: ‘As such a popular rebellion of the masses it was confined to Delhi, the United Provinces (as they are now called), and parts of central India and Bihar.’

‘Both Hindus and Moslems took full part in the Revolt.’ That is, both Hindus and Muslims were then feudal. ‘The feudal chiefs had they sympathy of the masses over large areas, but they were incapable, unorganised, and with no constructive ideal or community of interest. They had already played their role in history and there was no place for them in the future’. And many hedged their bets, waiting to see which side was winning, or helped the British - ‘played the part of quislings’ –

‘There was hardly any national and unifying sentiment among the leaders and a mere anti-foreign feeling, coupled with a desire to maintain their feudal privileges, was a poor substitute for this.’ (324)

*Mere* anti-foreign feeling. Feudal privileges. Inadequately national. Even the popular revolt was regional and limited.

‘It is certainly to the credit of the British that they could win over the Sikhs... whether it is to the credit or discredit of the Sikhs of those days depends on one’s point of view. It is clear, however, that there was a lack of nationalist feeling which might have bound

the people of India together. Nationalism of the modern type was yet to come… Not by fighting for a lost cause, the feudal order, would freedom come.’ (324).

Still, it ‘threw up some fine guerrilla leaders’ (324), Tantia Topi and Lakshmi Bai.

And he proceeds to talk about British brutality, massacres and revenge that shows itself from time to time in events like Jallianwala Bagh (325)

‘The rebel Indians sometimes indulged in cruel and barbarous behaviour; they were unorganised, suppressed and often angered by reports of British excesses.’ (324). But British atrocities were worse. (324) ‘Some frank and honourable English historians have occasionally lifted the veil and allowed us a glimpse of the race mania and lynching mentality which prevailed on an enormous scale’ (mentiones Kaye and Malleson, and Garrett [and Thompson’s] Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule In India) – these accounts ‘make one sick with horror’ (325)

Comparison with Nazism:
‘One would like to forget all this, for it is a ghastly and horrible picture showing man at his worst, even according to the new standards of barbarity set up by nazism and modern war.’ (324).

(326) ‘Biologists tell us that racialism is a myth and there is no such thing as a master race. But we in India have known racialism in all its forms ever since the commencement of British rule. The whole ideology of this rule was that of the herrenvolk and the master race, and the structure of government was based upon it; indeed the idea of a master race is inherent in imperialism. There was no subterfuge about it; it was proclaimed in unambiguous language by those in authority … India as a nation and Indians as individuals were subjected to insult, humiliation and contemptuous treatment … As an Indian, I am ashamed to write all this, for the memory of it hurts, and what hurts still more is the fact that we submitted for so long to this degradation. I would have preferred any kind of resistance to this, whatever the consequences, rather than that our people should endure this treatment. And yet it is better that both Indians and Englishmen should know it, for that is the psychological background of England’s connection with India, and psychology counts and racial memories are long.’

Views of 1857 are British ones; Indian views are seldom printed – mentions the banning of Savarkar’s book, over 30 years later still banned. (325)
As comparator – ‘the most important... since 1857’ appears in the typology. Notably of course in his description of 1942, the Quit India Movement. ‘And so, for the first time since the great revolt of 1857, vast numbers of people again rose to challenge by force (but a force without arms!) the fabric of British rule in India. It was a foolish and inopportune challenge, for all the organised and armed force was on the other side, and in greater measure indeed than at any previous time in history.’

His take on violence and non-violence contained here – force is stupid if it is not likely to be effective.

His account of 1857 in the Discovery of India is rather blurred until he can talk about the British brutality in its suppression; otherwise it is an uprising of feudal elements.

‘The Revolt of 1857 was a joint affair, but in its suppression Moslems felt strongly, and to some extent rightly, that they were the greater sufferers. This Revolt also put an end finally to any dreams or fantasies of the revival of the Delhi empire. That empire had vanished long ago, even before the British arrived on the scene…’ So the point is that the Revolt ‘tried to take advantage’ of ‘a symbol of a famous dynasty’. The ‘smashing of the symbol’ after 1857 left a ‘vacuum which sought for something to fill it’. He narrates how Sir Syed Ahmad Khan tried to fill this vacuum through Western education for Muslims and the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College.

Nehru’s accounts of the Revolt are ambiguous, especially if one looks elsewhere as well. In his autobiography 1857 appears as the context of the fall from power and grace of two central families in the early part of the book: that of the Nehru family itself, who lost everything during the Revolt and had to build itself up from scratch, having sided with the mutineers and hence having had to flee Delhi, and that of the family retainer, Mubarak Ali, who was something of an early mentor for the young Jawaharlal, regaling him with the tales of and something of the feel for the events of 1857. As a rationalist and a scientific socialist, Nehru was to refrain from glorifying these backward elements who participated in the Revolt; but something of the romance of the events seems to have stayed with him. The Autobiography – no proper treatment of the Revolt. *Discovery of India* – just a few pages.

Azad’s version 1957

---

Explicitly takes on Savarkar’s view without mentioning him by name – a whole section devoted to him. ‘Some Indians … have written … not history but mere political propaganda. These authors wanted to represent the uprising as a planned war of independence organised by the nobility of India against the British Government.’ (viii)

‘no evidence that the uprising had been pre-planned’ – the chapatti rumour and the lotus rumour stories had been examined by the Government of India in colonial times already and the planning theory had been discredited long ago. ‘This has been my believe for a long time’. And newer research has not made him change his view. (viii)

There then appears this problem: ‘the revolt of the Indian people was delayed for almost a hundred years’ after Plassey. Why was this? Azad’s answer: the people didn’t understand what was happening: British rule was unprecedented, they came as traders and insidiously took over as rulers. To some extent, then, the delay of 100 years is understandable. But even after the first 100 years, the response was inadequate. Azad stressed the ‘backwardness’ of the rebels, although he conceded that some at least were ‘moved by patriotic considerations’ (xiv).

Then he made the necessary connections between national culture and 1857. In 1857, he wrote, ‘Indian national culture had sunk very low. The leaders of the revolt could never agree. They were mutually jealous and continually intrigued against one another’. (xv). The implications for the present were clear: a good national culture accepts the collective identity of the nation and maintains solidarity with it. The naturalness of that nation cannot be questioned, far less the definition of nations and nationalism.

Conclusions:
‘All discussion about the Revolt of 1857 must turn to the question of its characterisation…’ Susobhanbabu wrote in 1957. This, he believed, involved three problems: ‘Was there a popular revolt in 1857-58? Can the movement be regarded as a national struggle? Should the social content of the upheaval be labelled as a feudal reaction?’

His own answers are interesting: on the balance of evidence, he answers ‘yes’ to the first question. The second is

87 Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 117.
more ambiguous: it ‘depends on what we understand by the term “national”’.\(^{89}\) He believed that

‘[t]he ideal of an unified all-India nation state or a democratic republic in India was certainly premature for most people in the 19th century, but that does not justify us in denying a national character to far-flung popular struggles for liberation from alien rule’.\(^ {90}\)

Among his examples of nationalism were Joan of Arc driving out ‘English intruders’, Spanish guerrillas or Russian peasants fighting Napoleon, and the Italian Carbonari. He acknowledged the ‘crude nature of the nationalism in the air in 1857’, but found no reason to deny the ‘national elements in the widespread upheaval’.\(^ {91}\) Susobhanbabu finds it difficult to deny the ‘strivings towards some kind of national outlook’\(^ {92}\) despite the lack of ‘bourgeois democratic consciousness, the “conception of individual liberty”’.\(^ {93}\) Here is a predecessor to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument about Indian history being written up as the history of a lack of something: as Dipeshda criticised Sumitda for this,\(^ {94}\) Susobhanbabu criticised Romesh Chandra Majumdar for denying that India had a ‘nationalism in the true sense’ in 1857. But Susobhanbabu was interested in pointing out the lack of a lack: that of nationalism. He is, of course, if we maintain a distinction between anticolonialism and nationalism, conflating the two: as is evident in his phrase ‘a national struggle against foreign rule’.\(^ {95}\)

And finally, in answer to the third question, on the ‘feudal character’ of 1857:

‘Where feudal ideas are still very powerful, as in 1857, a general movement would be necessarily feudal to that extent. But in the usual characterisation of the “mutiny”, “feudal” is quietly equated with “reactionary”. The equation, however, is blandly forgotten when our scholars praise the traditional culture of the country also shaped by feudal times.’\(^ {96}\)

The great Marxist historian thus concluded that 1857 was feudal, but not reactionary. Because it was a war of liberation from foreign rule.\(^ {97}\)

---

\(^ {89}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 119.
\(^ {90}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 119.
\(^ {92}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 121.
\(^ {93}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 119.
\(^ {95}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 119.
\(^ {96}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p. 121.
\(^ {97}\) Sarkar, ‘Views on 1857’, p 122.
Marxist entanglements with nationalism is a subject that requires further discussion; for now, it may be sufficient to raise the question as to why such entanglements, which are acknowledged as non-Marxist, remain so difficult to escape.