

THE REVOLT OF 1857:DEBATE (PART-1)

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DEBATE

Having discussed causes of the rebellion, let us, see how the events of 1857 have been interpreted by the contemporary officials as well as by subsequent scholars.

The nature of the 1857 uprising aroused fierce controversy from the very outset. The official British explanation was that only the Bengal army had mutinied and civil disturbances were caused by the breakdown of law and order machinery, many officials thought that it was only a mutiny.

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But this view was challenged by Benjamin Disraeli, the conservative leader, in July 1857. He said:

- ▶ "The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges. Such results are occasioned by adequate causes, and by the accumulation of adequate causes"

Then he queried:

- ▶ "Is it a military mutiny or is it, a national revolt?"

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The official view was challenged by a section of the British community in India also. Colonel G.B. Malleon, who later completed J.W. Kaye's History of the Sepoy War, challenged the official theory of simple mutiny: "The crisis came: At first apparently a mere military mutiny, it speedily changed its character, and became a national insurrection."

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V.D. Savarkar, who gave a nationalist interpretation to the uprising asserted in 1909 that it was the "Indian War of Independence." Savarkar's views were supported by S.B. Chaudhary, who in his writings demonstrated that 1857 was a "rising of the people". In fact, the historiographic tradition in India soon accepted this line of argument.

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A discordant note was however, struck by R.C. Majumdar. He refused to recognise 1857 as a war of Independence. His view was that "to regard the outbreak of 1857 as either national in character or a war of independence of India betrays a lack of true knowledge of the history of Indian people in the nineteenth century".

(To be continued)

