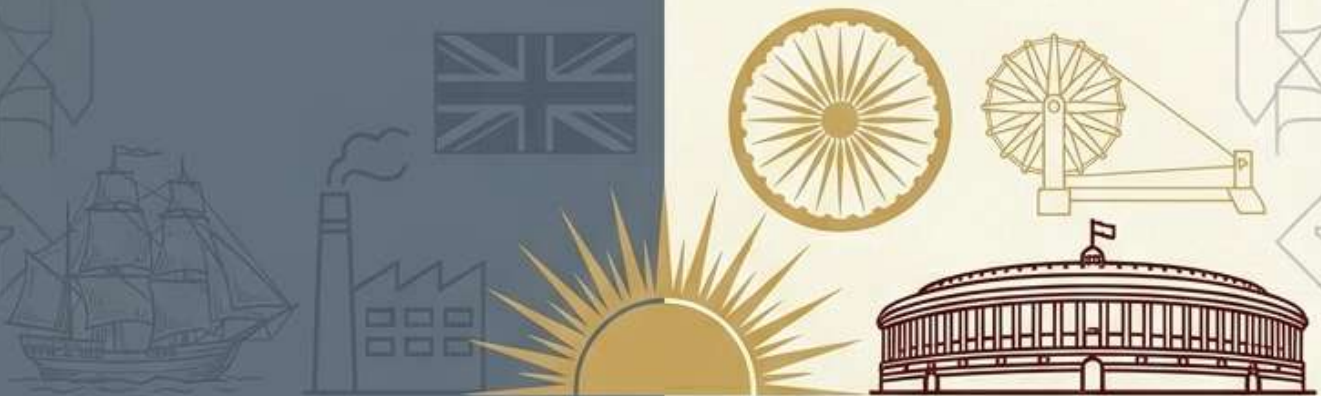


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01 [Sources of Modern Indian History](#)
- 02 [Rise of British Power in India](#)
- 03 [British Administration – Company to Crown](#)
- 04 [Land Revenue Systems and Agrarian Economy](#)
- 05 [Colonial Economy – Drain of Wealth & Deindustrialisation](#)
- 06 [Revolt of 1857 – Causes, Nature & Impact](#)
- 07 [Indian Renaissance and Social Reform Movements](#)
- 08 [Women's Question in Colonial India](#)
- 09 [Indian Nationalism – Moderates and Extremists](#)
- 10 [Gandhian Mass Movements – Non-Cooperation to Quit India](#)
- 11 [Partition of India – Communalism & Independence](#)
- 12 [Post-Independence India – Constitution to LPG Reforms](#)
- 13 [British Industrial Policy, Labour & Tribal Movements](#)
- 14 [India and the World – Colonialism to Decolonisation](#)

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Revolt of 1857: Causes, Nature, and Impact

The empire's greatest crisis: from greased cartridges to Bahadur Shah Zafar's trial — causes, course, suppression, and the historiographical battle over what 1857 actually was

● **HIGH — 8–11 PYQS (LAST DECADE) — THE HIGHEST PYQ-FREQUENCY CHAPTER IN MODERN INDIA. EVERY CATEGORY OF QUESTION APPEARS: MCQS ON LEADERS AND LOCATIONS, ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS ON THE NATURE DEBATE (MUTINY VS. NATIONAL UPRISING), DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS ON CAUSES (MILITARY, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL/RELIGIOUS), AND HISTORIOGRAPHY QUESTIONS ON SAVARKAR VS. MAJUMDAR VS. STOKES.**

WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

- **PYQ pattern:** MCQs on: who led the revolt where (Meerut → Mangal Pandey; Delhi → Bahadur Shah Zafar; Kanpur → Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope; Lucknow → Begum Hazrat Mahal; Jhansi → Lakshmi Bai; Bareilly → Khan Bahadur Khan; Arrah → Kunwar Singh); the greased cartridge question; the first sepoys to mutiny (3rd Cavalry, Meerut); which regiments were involved; the suppression (Havelock, Outram, Campbell at Lucknow; John Nicholson at Delhi); the consequences (1858 Act, Queen's Proclamation). Descriptive: "Critically examine the causes of 1857"; "Assess the nature of the 1857 revolt"; "How did 1857 change British policy?"
- **Recent trend (2023–2026):** Increasing questions on the social history of 1857 — peasant participation, women's roles (Begum Hazrat Mahal, Lakshmi Bai, Jhalkari Bai), tribal participation; questions pairing the revolt's social base with specific regions; the "uneven geography" of the revolt (why Bengal, Bombay, Madras did not join)
- **Biggest trap(s):** Treating 1857 as exclusively a sepoy mutiny — peasant and taluqdar participation were equally important in Awadh; calling it "The First War of Independence" (Savarkar's term) without acknowledging its contested nature; treating the greased cartridges as *the* cause rather than the immediate trigger of a revolt with deep structural causes; confusing Tantia Tope (Nana Sahib's general) with Nana Sahib himself; assuming Bengal, Bombay, and Madras sepoys joined the revolt equally — they did not; the revolt was geographically concentrated in the Bengal Army's recruitment areas (Awadh, Gangetic plain, Bundelkhand)
- **Strategy:** Build causes in four layers (military, political, economic, social/religious) with specific evidence for each. Map the geographic spread with leaders. Then master the historiographical debate (colonial "mutiny" vs. nationalist "national uprising" vs. revisionist "complex event"). Always distinguish *immediate trigger* (greased cartridges) from *underlying causes* (all four layers).

CHRONOLOGICAL ANCHORS

- **January 1857** — New Enfield Pattern 1853 rifle cartridges issued; rumours spread that grease is beef-fat and pork-fat mixed; **Mangal Pandey** incident at Barrackpore (29 March 1857) — first individual act of defiance
- **10 May 1857** — **Meerut:** 3rd Native Cavalry sepoys break free; kill European officers; march to Delhi overnight
- **11 May 1857** — Delhi: sepoys arrive at dawn; **Bahadur Shah Zafar II** proclaimed Emperor; the revolt acquires a symbolic sovereign and a Mughal constitutional framework
- **May–June 1857** — Spread: Ferozpur, Bareilly, Rohilkhand, Lucknow, Kanpur; the Bengal Army's Awadh-recruited regiments mutiny in sequence
- **27 June 1857** — **Kanpur massacre:** General Wheeler's garrison surrenders to **Nana Sahib** on safe conduct; sepoys open fire on boats; approximately 400 British killed; becomes the central British propaganda atrocity of the revolt
- **July 1857** — Lucknow Residency besieged; **Henry Lawrence** killed (2 July); **Begum Hazrat Mahal** leads Awadh resistance

- **June–September 1857** — Delhi siege; British forces under **John Nicholson** assault and retake Delhi (14–20 September); Bahadur Shah Zafar captured; his two sons **Mirza Mughal** and **Mirza Khizr Sultan** and grandson killed by **William Hodson** (21 September)
- **September 1857** — Lucknow first relief by **Havelock** and **Outram** (25 September); they become besieged in the Residency; second relief by **Colin Campbell** (November 1857)
- **January 1858** — Lucknow finally retaken by Campbell (March 1858); Begum Hazrat Mahal flees to Nepal
- **April 1858** — Jhansi falls; **Lakshmi Bai** escapes with Tantia Toppe to Gwalior
- **June 1858** — **Lakshmi Bai** killed in battle at **Kotah-ki-Serai** (17 June) near Gwalior; the last major military engagement
- **1 November 1858** — Queen's Proclamation; Company abolished; Crown takes over
- **8 November 1862** — **Bahadur Shah Zafar** dies in exile in **Rangoon** (Yangon), Myanmar
- **April 1859** — **Tantia Toppe** captured through betrayal; hanged at Shivpuri (18 April 1859); the revolt officially ends

I. THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT — WHY 1857 WAS POSSIBLE

The revolt of 1857 did not emerge from a single grievance or a single moment. It was the product of a century of colonial transformation that had generated simultaneous and mutually reinforcing crises in the military, political, economic, and social orders of north India. Understanding why it happened requires understanding what the preceding century had done to each of these orders.

Every serious answer to "what caused 1857" must address all four layers simultaneously — not as a list but as an interacting system:

- **Military causes:** grievances of the Bengal Army sepoys; the cartridge issue as trigger
- **Political causes:** Dalhousie's annexations; the displacement of ruling classes; the Mughal dynasty's terminal humiliation
- **Economic causes:** agrarian distress; taluqdar dispossession; peasant indebtedness; commercialisation of the Awadh economy
- **Social/religious causes:** missionary activity; reform legislation; the chapati movement; fear of forcible conversion

The examiner who asks "what caused 1857" is testing whether you can give a multi-causal answer with *specific evidence* for each layer. The greased cartridges are the trigger — the spark. The structural causes are the fuel. A fire needs both.

II. MILITARY CAUSES — THE BENGAL ARMY'S STRUCTURAL GRIEVANCES

The Bengal Army was the largest of the three Company armies and the most politically volatile. Its specific culture and composition created grievances that the greased cartridge issue crystallised into open revolt.

A. Composition and Culture of the Bengal Army

- The Bengal Army's infantry was dominated by **high-caste Hindus** — primarily **Brahmins** and **Rajputs** from Awadh and the upper Gangetic plain (collectively called *Purbiyas* or eastern men); they were recruited precisely for their social status and martial tradition but this homogeneity created a corps with collective caste identity
- Caste privileges within the Bengal Army: sepoys were allowed to maintain caste observances — separate cooking areas, refusal to eat with lower castes, exemption from duties that violated caste

rules; officers who understood caste accommodated these requirements; the social distance between sepoys and their British officers had grown over the preceding decades as the personal familiarity of earlier commanders was replaced by racial contempt

- **Vellore Mutiny (1806):** an earlier warning — sepoys at Vellore (Madras Army) mutinied over orders requiring new uniform regulations (turbans, moustaches, religious marks restricted); suppressed; lessons partially learned by the Madras Army but not institutionalised in the Bengal Army

B. Specific Military Grievances Before 1857

- **General Service Enlistment Act (1856):** Lord Canning's Act required all new recruits to serve overseas if required; the Bengal Army's high-caste Hindu sepoys considered overseas service (*kala pani*) a ritual pollution — crossing the black water caused loss of caste; the Act eliminated the opt-out that had previously existed; even those already serving feared its implications
- **Pay and promotion:** sepoys' pay had not increased significantly since the late 18th century; their real purchasing power had declined as prices rose; promotion was by seniority, not merit — a sepoy could spend thirty years as a private; the Indian officer grades (*subadar*, *jemadar*) were capped below the lowest European officer grade; no Indian could command Europeans
- **Loss of "foreign service allowance" (*batta*):** the Bengal Army had long received extra *batta* when serving outside Bengal; as the Company annexed territory, more postings became "home service" (no extra *batta*); Awadh's annexation (1856) removed the extra pay for the majority of Bengal Army soldiers who were from Awadh
- **Racial contempt of officers:** by the 1850s, the relationship between British officers and Indian sepoys had deteriorated sharply; officers who had learnt Hindustani and maintained personal relationships with their men were replaced by officers who maintained racial distance; the sepoys felt simultaneously essential to the empire and despised by the men who commanded them
- **Ratio imbalance:** by 1856, the ratio of Indian to European troops in the Bengal Army was approximately 6:1 — far higher than the post-1857 norm; the relative absence of European troops made collective action by sepoys militarily feasible

C. The Greased Cartridge Issue — Trigger and Mechanism

The Enfield Pattern 1853 rifle was a new weapon adopted by the British Army and issued to the Bengal Army from late 1856. It required a new cartridge that had to be bitten open before loading.

- **The grease rumour:** it was rumoured — and widely believed — that the cartridge paper was greased with a mixture of beef fat (offensive to Hindus) and pork fat (offensive to Muslims); if sepoys bit the cartridge, they would violate their respective religious prohibitions in the same act
- **The specific origin:** the Dum Dum Arsenal near Calcutta (where cartridges were made) had a workforce of lower-caste workers; a low-caste *lascar* reportedly told a high-caste Brahmin sepoy that his lips would be defiled by biting the cartridge — a comment designed to provoke maximum anxiety about ritual pollution
- **Was the rumour true?** — The cartridges did contain tallow (animal fat) but the specific mixture claimed is unclear; the British government denied using cow and pig fat specifically; but the denial was irrelevant — the social-psychological conditions for maximum distrust were already present
- **Barrackpore (29 March 1857): Mangal Pandey** (34th Bengal Native Infantry) attacked his European officers on the parade ground; called on other sepoys to rise; no one joined him; arrested;

hanged 8 April 1857; his regiment disbanded; Mangal Pandey becomes a nationalist martyr and the revolt's symbolic precursor

- **Meerut (9–10 May 1857):** 85 sepoys of the 3rd Native Cavalry refused to handle new cartridges; court-martialled; sentenced to 10 years hard labour; publicly stripped of uniforms and shackled in front of their regiment on 9 May; the humiliation of the punishment (deliberately excessive, designed to break resistance) had the opposite effect; on 10 May, sepoys freed their imprisoned comrades, killed European officers and their families (including civilian women and children), and marched overnight to Delhi

WHY MEERUT MATTERS — THE STRATEGIC FAILURE

The most militarily significant fact about the Meerut outbreak is what the British garrison *did not do*: there were approximately 2,200 European troops and artillery at Meerut — enough to intercept the mutineers and prevent the march to Delhi. General **Hewitt** and Brigadier **Wilson** failed to act; they were paralysed by indecision and fear; the mutineers reached Delhi unopposed. If Delhi had been held — if Bahadur Shah Zafar had not become the revolt's symbolic sovereign — the uprising would have remained a local mutiny without a political centre. The British failure at Meerut on the night of 10–11 May was the single most consequential tactical failure of the entire revolt.

III. POLITICAL CAUSES — THE DISPLACEMENT OF RULING CLASSES

The military revolt was the mechanism of the 1857 uprising; the political context that gave it scale and leadership was the displacement of ruling classes by Dalhousie's policies.

A. Doctrine of Lapse and Dispossessed Royalty

- **Jhansi: Lakshmi Bai**, widow of Raja **Gangadhar Rao** (died 1853); Dalhousie refused to recognise her adopted son; Jhansi annexed; Lakshmi Bai appealed to the Court of Directors — rejected; when the revolt began, she had no alternative but to lead Jhansi's resistance; she was not the initiator of the revolt but its most brilliant military commander once drawn in
- **Nagpur:** the Bhonsle dynasty's entire territory annexed (1854); Maratha soldiers and administrators dispossessed; Nagpur's garrison provided a significant portion of the rebels in Central India
- **Nana Sahib** (Dhundu Pant): adopted son of the last Peshwa Baji Rao II (died 1853); his pension (₹8 lakh annually) terminated by the Company because it did not recognise adopted succession for pension purposes; Nana Sahib's personal grievance against the Company was direct and specific — he had lost a large income because of the doctrine of lapse; he became the revolt's leader at Kanpur

B. Awadh — The Most Important Political Cause

Awadh's annexation (1856) was the single most politically explosive act in the chain of events leading to 1857. The revolt's intensity, geographical extent, and popular character were directly produced by Awadh.

- **Why Awadh mattered:** the Bengal Army was recruited overwhelmingly from Awadh; approximately 75,000 of the Bengal Army's 128,000 Indian soldiers were from Awadh; they served in the army to send remittances home; their families' social and economic position in Awadh depended on the nawabi government's survival

- **The taluqdars' dispossession:** Dalhousie's revenue settlements in Awadh (conducted hurriedly after annexation) bypassed the 21,000 *taluqdars* who had controlled territorial authority under the nawabi; they were stripped of revenue rights and reduced to ordinary zamindars or lower; the dispossessed taluqdars had both the social authority and the military capacity (their own armed retainers) to lead a popular uprising
- **Key taluqdar-led districts:** Hardoi (Raja Man Singh), Sitapur, Barabanki, Sultanpur — the districts with the heaviest taluqdar concentration were the districts with the most intense revolt
- **Nawab Wajid Ali Shah:** exiled to Calcutta on annexation; his mother, **Hazrat Mahal** (Begum Hazrat Mahal), remained in Lucknow; she became the de facto political leader of the Awadh revolt, issuing proclamations in the name of her young son **Birjis Qadr** (proclaimed King of Awadh by the rebels)

The 1857 revolt in Awadh was not simply a sepoy mutiny or simply a taluqdar revolt — it was the fusion of both. The Bengal Army sepoys who mutinied were overwhelmingly *from* Awadh; they returned home to find their families' taluqdar landlords dispossessed and the agrarian structure overturned. The sepoy's military grievance (greased cartridges, general service act) merged with his family's agrarian grievance (dispossession of the taluqdar patron) to produce a total war in which military and civilian resistance were inseparable. This is why the Awadh theatre was so much more intense and prolonged than any other.

C. The Mughal Framework — Delhi as Symbolic Centre

The mutineers' march to Delhi and proclamation of Bahadur Shah Zafar as emperor was not merely symbolic — it provided the revolt with a constitutional framework:

- **Bahadur Shah Zafar II** (1775–1862): the last Mughal emperor; an elderly poet with no real power; the Company had already reduced him to a pensioner; under Dalhousie's plan, the Mughal title would have been extinguished on his death; his son and designated heir **Mirza Dara Bakht** had already been refused the title; the sepoys' proclamation of Zafar reversed this humiliation and invoked the legitimacy of Mughal imperial authority
- The revolt's proclamations — in Persian, Urdu, and Hindi — spoke of restoring the Mughal order; this was not merely nostalgia but a constitutional claim: all authority derived from the emperor; the Company had usurped what rightfully belonged to Delhi
- The political implication: for a brief period (May–September 1857), there were *two* legitimate sovereigns in India — the Mughal emperor (recognised by the rebels) and the British Crown (recognised by loyalists); this was a genuine constitutional contest, not merely a military one
- **Bahadur Shah Zafar's own position:** he was reluctant; he was 82 years old and had no military capacity; he was pressed by the sepoys and had little choice; his trial (1858) became a major political event — the British needed to delegitimise the Mughal claim and did so through a legal process that was a transparent exercise in victor's justice

IV. ECONOMIC CAUSES — AGRARIAN DISTRESS AND PEASANT GRIEVANCES

A. The Agrarian Foundation of the Revolt

The 1857 revolt in Awadh and the NW Provinces was not only a military and political event — it had deep roots in the agrarian distress produced by colonial revenue systems.

- **Revenue settlements in Awadh:** the hurried summary settlements after annexation (1856–57) were conducted by **Robert Montgomery** and **Coverly Jackson** without the careful survey that previous settlements in Bengal and NW Provinces had required; revenue demands were frequently set too high; many taluqdars and peasants faced immediate default
- **Revenue demand in NW Provinces:** the Mahalwari settlements of the 1830s–40s had established high assessments; by the 1850s, many villages in western UP were carrying revenue arrears; peasant indebtedness to moneylenders was widespread; the moneylender-revenue collector pressure on the cultivating community was at its peak precisely when the revolt began

B. The Taluqdars as Peasant Protectors

The taluqdars of Awadh, whatever their own elite interests, had served a protective function for peasant cultivators — they had advanced revenue in bad years, provided credit, and maintained the social networks that connected cultivating families to the land. The colonial revenue settlement's bypassing of taluqdars exposed cultivating families to direct state revenue demand without the customary social buffer.

- Peasants joined the revolt not primarily out of nationalist consciousness but out of specific local grievances — arrears, evictions, moneylender debt — and out of solidarity with the taluqdar networks they were embedded in
- **Eric Stokes** (*The Peasant Armed*, posthumous 1986) demonstrated through district-level analysis that peasant participation in the revolt was highest in districts with the most recent and most disruptive revenue settlements, and lowest in districts where settlements were older and had stabilised; this is the clearest empirical evidence that agrarian grievances drove peasant participation

C. Specific Economic Grievances Beyond Awadh

- **Disbanded soldiers:** the Awadh army (55,000 strong) was disbanded without pension after annexation (1856); these former soldiers, most of high-caste backgrounds similar to the Bengal Army sepoys, were the primary recruitment pool for the rebel forces in Awadh; their personal economic displacement was total
- **The annexation of Jhansi:** the Jhansi state's officials, soldiers, and revenue administrators were all displaced; Jhansi's economic life had centred on the court and its expenditure; annexation eliminated this entirely
- **Trade disruption:** the commercial classes of Awadh (merchants, bankers, suppliers to the nawabi court) suffered economic losses from annexation; the Lucknow economy had supported tens of thousands through court-related employment; the city's population and economic activity contracted sharply after 1856

V. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CAUSES — THE FEAR OF CONVERSION

A. Missionary Activity and the Conversion Fear

From the early 19th century, Christian missionary activity in India had expanded enormously — enabled by the Charter Act of 1813 which permitted missionaries to operate freely.

- Prominent missionary organisations: **Church Missionary Society, London Missionary Society, Basel Mission, American Presbyterian Mission** — all operating in north India by the 1840s–50s
- The missionaries' approach was often deliberately provocative: publicly denouncing Hindu and Muslim religious practices, distributing religious tracts at temple and mosque entrances, converting and sheltering runaway wives and widows
- **Conversion by the colonial state: the Caste Disabilities Removal Act (1850)** declared that conversion to Christianity would not result in loss of property rights under Hindu or Muslim inheritance law — specifically designed to remove the economic disincentive to conversion; interpreted by many Indians as a state measure to facilitate conversion
- **Chaplains in the Bengal Army:** army chaplains were explicitly evangelical; there were documented cases of army officers pressuring individual sepoys to convert; the institutional culture of the Bengal Army by the 1850s was perceived as actively hostile to Hindu and Muslim religion

B. The Chapati Movement — Ritual Circulation as Warning System

In early 1857, before the outbreak at Meerut, an unexplained circulation of *chapattis* (unleavened bread) spread across north India: a *chaukidar* (watchman) would receive chapattis and be instructed to make more and pass them on; within days, thousands of chapattis were circulating across hundreds of miles.

- The British, who witnessed the phenomenon without understanding it, were alarmed; **Sir Henry Lawrence** described it as a warning sign; the chapati circulation was interpreted by some British officials as a deliberate signal of impending revolt
- Historians are divided: **Kim Wagner** (*The Great Fear of 1857*, 2010) argues the chapati movement was genuinely connected to the pre-revolt communication network — possibly as a ritual call to readiness; others see it as a folk epidemic of anxiety without central organisation
- The significance for the exam: the chapati movement evidences that a shared consciousness of crisis existed across north India *before* the cartridge issue; the revolt was prepared for, even if not centrally organised

C. Social Reform Legislation and Conservative Backlash

Several colonial social reform measures of the 1840s–50s generated conservative backlash that fed the revolt's social dimension:

- **Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856):** promoted by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar; legalised widow remarriage; deeply opposed by orthodox Hindus who saw it as a colonial attack on Hindu family law; the legislation was interpreted as part of a pattern of interference with Hindu religious custom
- **Female education** expansion by missionary schools: orthodox opinion in north India saw education of women as preparation for conversion
- **Evangelical Governor-Generals:** Dalhousie was personally an Evangelical Protestant; his administration's tone was one of contempt for Indian religion; the perception that the colonial state was actively pursuing Christianisation was widespread and not entirely inaccurate
- The military implication: Bengal Army sepoys who shared orthodox Hindu and Muslim views absorbed these anxieties into their assessment of the greased cartridge issue; the cartridge was not an isolated incident but the confirmation of a feared pattern

A. The Revolt's Geography — What Happened Where

The revolt was geographically concentrated. Understanding its geography is as important as understanding its causes.

Areas of intense revolt:

- **Awadh (Lucknow and surrounding districts):** the most intense and prolonged theatre; taluqdar + sepoy + peasant combination; Begum Hazrat Mahal's leadership; Lucknow Residency siege (July–November 1857)
- **NW Provinces (western UP):** Delhi, Meerut, Bareilly, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand; the Bengal Army's home districts; strong taluqdar and sepoy participation
- **Bundelkhand (Jhansi, Banda, Kalpi):** Lakshmi Bai and Tantia Tope; the most mobile and militarily skilled component of the revolt
- **Bihar (Danapur, Arrah): Kunwar Singh** of Jagdispur — the revolt's most brilliant guerrilla commander; 80 years old at the time; conducted a highly mobile campaign against much younger British commanders for a year

Areas that did not revolt:

- **Bengal Presidency** (excluding Bihar): Bengal's educated classes were largely loyal; the Calcutta merchant and zamindar class had too much invested in colonial stability; the Bengal sepoys of the lower-status units did not mutiny on the same scale
- **Bombay and Madras Presidencies:** only isolated incidents; the Bombay and Madras Armies had different compositions (less high-caste Awadh dominance); the Deccan and south India's political classes had different grievances
- **Punjab:** the Sikh sardars and Gurkha soldiers who had been defeated by the British within the decade (Anglo-Sikh Wars, 1845–49) were used by the British *against* the revolt; Punjab provided the bulk of the British-loyal forces that retook Delhi; the Sikh community's attitude was partly revenge for Mughal persecution of Sikh gurus and partly calculation about British reward for loyalty
- **Hyderabad and most princely states:** the Nizam remained loyal; the subsidiary alliance princes calculated that the British would win and loyalty would be rewarded

B. Major Leaders — Detailed Profiles

Bahadur Shah Zafar II (1775–1862):

- Last Mughal emperor; nominal sovereign of the revolt
- A poet of remarkable quality (Urdu ghazals still recited); a reluctant political actor; pressured by sepoys into lending his name to the revolt
- After Delhi's recapture (September 1857), surrendered at the Humayun's Tomb to **William Hodson** on promise of life; his sons Mirza Mughal and Mirza Khizr Sultan killed by Hodson at the Khooni Darwaza (Bloody Gate) without trial
- Tried by a military commission (January 1858); **Harriet Tyler** and other British witnesses; convicted of treason and rebellion; exiled to Rangoon (Burma); died 7 November 1862; buried in

Rangoon; his burial place was unmarked by the British and "rediscovered" in 1991

- His final couplet: *Lagta nahin hai dil mera ujare dayaar mein* (My heart finds no solace in this desolate land)

Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi (c. 1828–1858):

- Born Manikarnika Tambe; married Raja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi; widowed 1853; Dalhousie refused to recognise her adopted son **Damodar Rao**
- Initially sought legal redress; when the revolt began (June 1857), she was placed in an ambiguous position — the British later claimed she was responsible for the murder of European officers and their families at Jhansi; she denied it; **Hugh Rose** (commanding the Central India Field Force) besieged Jhansi (March 1858); Lakshmi Bai escaped on horseback (April 1858) with her adopted son strapped to her back; joined **Tantia Tope** at Kalpi; they captured Gwalior (June 1858)
- Killed 17 June 1858 at **Kotah-ki-Serai** during the British assault on Gwalior; she was dressed as a male cavalry trooper; her identity was confirmed only after her death; **General Hugh Rose** wrote: "She was the best and bravest military leader of the rebels"
- **Jhalkari Bai**: Lakshmi Bai's commander of a women's corps (*Durga Dal*); legend holds she disguised herself as Lakshmi Bai to enable the Rani's escape from Jhansi; historically documented in the Bundeli oral tradition; largely absent from British sources

Tantia Tope (c. 1814–1859):

- Real name **Ramchandra Pandurang Tope**; Nana Sahib's general; most consistently effective military commander of the revolt
- Led the forces that killed British troops at Kanpur; attempted two relief operations for Lucknow; conducted the mobile campaign through Rajputana and Central India after the main revolt was suppressed; always avoided fixed defensive battles (which the British dominated) in favour of rapid movement
- His campaign of 1858–59 — moving between Rajputana, Madhya Pradesh, and the Deccan — baffled the British pursuit for nearly a year; captured only through **betrayal by Man Singh**, the Raja of Narwar (who had previously sheltered him); hanged at Shivpuri, 18 April 1859

Nana Sahib (c. 1824–c. 1859):

- Adopted son of Peshwa Bajji Rao II; real name **Dhundu Pant**; pension terminated by Company (1853)
- Led the revolt at Kanpur; accepted General Wheeler's surrender (27 June 1857); the subsequent massacre of British troops and civilians on the boats remains disputed — whether Nana Sahib ordered it or whether sepoys acted independently is unclear; the massacre at **Bibighar** (where British women and children were killed before Campbell's army arrived) became the central atrocity in British propaganda
- After Kanpur's recapture (July 1857), Nana Sahib retreated to Nepal; his subsequent fate is unknown — he apparently died in Nepal, possibly in 1859, but the uncertainty fed decades of rumours and alleged sightings

Begum Hazrat Mahal (c. 1820–1879):

- One of Wajid Ali Shah's wives; mother of Birjis Qadr (proclaimed King of Awadh by the rebels)
- Organised the Awadh resistance from Lucknow; issued proclamations attacking the Company's annexation; conducted diplomatic correspondence with other rebel leaders; her military commanders included Ahmad Ullah Shah (*Maulvi of Faizabad*) — a religious figure who gave the Awadh revolt a partly Islamic character

- After the revolt's failure, fled to Nepal (1858); refused the British amnesty offer; died in Kathmandu (1879); buried in the mosque of the Kathmandu Jama Masjid

Kunwar Singh (c. 1777–1858):

- Zamindar of Jagdispur, Bhojpur district (Bihar); approximately 80 years old when the revolt began
- Defeated or evaded the British consistently from July 1857 to April 1858; his military genius lay in mobility and knowledge of terrain; crossed the Ganga with his force despite British pursuit (April 1858); his arm was shot by British fire during the crossing — he cut it off himself and offered it to the Ganga
- Died of wounds on 26 April 1858; the most celebrated military figure of the Bihar revolt

Ahmad Ullah Shah (Maulvi of Faizabad) (c. 1790–1858):

- Islamic scholar and preacher; organised popular resistance in Faizabad before the revolt; arrested February 1857 and sentenced to imprisonment; freed by the revolt's outbreak
- The most important religious leader of the Awadh revolt; gave it an Islamic legitimacy in the region's Muslim population; conducted guerrilla operations long after the main revolt collapsed
- Killed June 1858 by the Raja of Powayan for the British reward; his head was brought to the collector's office; the circumstances of his death became a symbol of the betrayal that ended the revolt

C. British Suppression — Military Events and Commanders

Delhi:

- The British besieged Delhi from June 1857; the assault came in September
- **John Nicholson** — the most aggressive British commander; killed leading the storming of Delhi (20 September 1857); his death made him a British legend; the siege required additional artillery brought from the Punjab and engineering preparation
- **The Kashmir Gate** (14 September 1857): a small team of Engineers including **John Home**, **Philip Salkeld** (both killed), and **bugler Robert Hawthorne** blew open the Kashmir Gate of Delhi to allow the assault — all awarded Victoria Crosses; one of the most celebrated acts of individual bravery in British military history

Lucknow:

- **First relief (25 September 1857):** Generals **Henry Havelock** and **James Outram** fought through Lucknow to the Residency; too weak to evacuate; became besieged themselves
- **Second relief (November 1857):** **Colin Campbell** (Commander-in-Chief India) reached Lucknow; evacuated civilians and wounded; left a garrison
- **Final recapture (March 1858):** Campbell with a large army retook Lucknow systematically; the revolt in Awadh continued as guerrilla resistance for months after

The Reprisals:

- British reprisals were savage and systematic — villages suspected of rebel sympathies burned; captured rebels hanged in large numbers; the most notorious: **Colonel Neill** at Kanpur and Allahabad ordered mass hangings and forced high-caste Hindus to lick blood from the ground before hanging (the ultimate caste humiliation)
- British soldiers and officers used the Kanpur massacre (the "Cawnpore atrocity") to justify collective punishment; contemporary estimates of Indian deaths in the reprisals range from 100,000 to

hundreds of thousands — the precise figure is unknowable

- **William Howard Russell** (correspondent for *The Times*, London) reported British reprisals with sufficient honesty to provoke a parliamentary debate; his dispatches are primary sources for the revolt's suppression

D. Tribal Participation — The Forgotten Dimension

The 1857 revolt drew in tribal communities who had their own grievances against the colonial land and forest settlement systems — grievances that were structurally similar to but distinct from those of the Bengal Army or the taluqdars.

- **Bhil participation (Rajputana and Central India):** the Bhils of Rajputana and Central India joined the revolt in significant numbers; their primary grievances were forest regulations that restricted access to forest produce, the extension of revenue settlements onto tribal territories, and the penetration of moneylenders into their communities; Bhil chiefs in Nimach and Neemuch districts coordinated with rebel sepoy; the British used the Bombay Army's Bhil Corps (recruited earlier precisely to control the community) against the rebel Bhils — a deliberate colonial strategy of turning one section of a community against another
- **Gond participation (Central India and NW Provinces):** the Gond communities of Chhattisgarh and the Vindhyan range participated where the revolt reached their territories; the Gondwana chiefs had lost authority under the Central India Agency settlements; several minor Gond chiefs joined the rebel coalition in 1857
- **Kol communities (Jharkhand region):** the Kol and Munda communities of Jharkhand had already revolted in 1831–32 (the **Kol Uprising**) and 1855–56 (the Santhal Rebellion) against land alienation; in 1857, the ongoing Santhal resistance in the Rajmahal Hills was partly concurrent with the main revolt, though not coordinated with it; the colonial army's use of Santhals against the Bengal rebels in some districts is documented

THE TRIBAL REVOLTS AND 1857 — CONNECTION AND DISTINCTION

Tribal participation in 1857 was not simply an extension of the "sepoy mutiny" — tribal communities had their own distinct causes (forest and land alienation, money lender penetration, destruction of traditional authority structures) that happened to produce revolt at the same moment. **Ranajit Guha** (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 1983) argued that tribal insurgency should be understood as having its own logic — not as a reaction to elite politics but as a direct response to colonial economic transformation in specific ecological and social contexts. The 1857 revolt in its total character included this tribal dimension, which colonial historiography systematically excluded by focusing exclusively on the Bengal Army.

E. The Azamgarh Proclamation — Primary Source Evidence

The **Azamgarh Proclamation** (25 August 1857) — issued in the name of Bahadur Shah Zafar from the rebel-held town of Azamgarh — is the most important primary source for understanding the revolt's stated objectives and social base.

- **Address to the four classes:** the proclamation explicitly addressed four communities whose grievances it acknowledged:
 - **Zemindars:** promised restoration of lands taken by the British; the doctrine of lapse reversed; taluqdari rights restored
 - **Merchants:** promised removal of the Company's trade monopolies and taxes; free trade under a restored Mughal framework; the drain reversed

- **Sepoys:** promised higher pay; restoration of *batta*; removal of racial discrimination in promotion
- **Artisans:** promised protection from Manchester competition; restoration of patronage; government support for indigenous manufactures
- **Significance:** the Azamgarh Proclamation demonstrates that the revolt's leadership understood its social base as multi-class and multi-community; it was not simply restoring the Mughal court — it was attempting to build a coalition across different communities by addressing each community's specific colonial grievance
- **Historiographical significance:** S.N. Sen and Stokes both used the Azamgarh Proclamation as evidence that the revolt had a political programme beyond simple restoration; Majumdar acknowledged the proclamation but argued its programme was inherently conservative (restoring pre-colonial elites); **Rudrangshu Mukherjee** (*Awadh in Revolt*, 1984) used it to argue that the Awadh revolt had a genuinely political anti-colonial character that exceeded the "mutiny" characterisation

The revolt's failure to spread to Bengal, Bombay, Madras, and most of the princely states is as historically significant as its intensity in Awadh. Understanding the non-revolt is part of understanding 1857.

A. Bengal's Educated Classes and the Moderate Response

The Bengal intelligentsia — the class that would lead Indian nationalism twenty years later — was largely unsympathetic to the 1857 revolt. Their reasons:

- The revolt's leadership (Mughal emperor, taluqdars, orthodox sepoys) represented a social order that the Bengal intelligentsia had criticised as backward, feudal, and hostile to the reform agenda they shared with liberal British administrators
- **Calcutta zamindars and merchants** had too much invested in colonial stability — the Permanent Settlement had given them property rights they did not want a Mughal restoration to undermine
- **Ram Mohan Roy's reformist tradition** saw British rule as a historical stage in India's progress; restoring the Mughal order would mean reversing social reform; this was not a calculation they were willing to make
- The notable exception: **Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar** and other reformers were uncomfortable with both the revolt and the reprisals, but took no public political position

B. The Princely States and the Subsidiary Alliance Calculation

Most princely states remained loyal — or at least neutral. The calculation was straightforward:

- They had survived under the subsidiary alliance system; a British victory would confirm their position; a rebel victory would bring either Mughal restoration (reducing princely autonomy) or chaos
- **Scindia of Gwalior** (whose army mutinied in June 1858 and handed Gwalior to Lakshmi Bai and Tantia Tope without a fight) remained personally loyal to the British even as his soldiers joined the revolt
- **Nizam of Hyderabad** provided loyal cavalry; **Maharaja of Kashmir** Gulab Singh remained loyal; the Hill states of Rajputana were largely neutral

A. Administrative Consequences — The 1858 Restructuring

The revolt's most immediate consequence was the abolition of the East India Company and the assumption of direct Crown sovereignty:

- **Government of India Act (August 1858):** Company abolished; Secretary of State for India created; Viceroy (Governor-General + Crown representative); the constitutional framework described in Chapter 3
- **Queen's Proclamation (1 November 1858):** promises to respect Indian religious practices; no further annexations (doctrine of lapse abandoned); Indians eligible for Crown service; respected treaties with princes; the political compact that defined the relationship between Crown and India for the next 90 years

B. Military Reorganisation

The most consequential changes were military:

- **European-Indian ratio fixed:** 1:2 (Bengal, Madras), 1:3 (Bombay) — dramatically more European troops permanently stationed in India; the cost was enormous and was charged to Indian revenues
- **Artillery monopoly:** all artillery concentrated in European units; Indian units kept as infantry only; no Indian soldier could control the arm that decided battles
- **Recruitment shift:** from Awadh Brahmins and Rajputs (the core of the Bengal Army mutiny) to **Sikhs, Gurkhas, Jats, Pathans, Dogras** — the "martial races" theory formalised; communities that had helped suppress the revolt over-recruited; communities that had led it under-recruited
- **Abolition of the Bengal Army's separate identity:** the three Presidency Armies were eventually unified (1895) into the **Indian Army** under a single Commander-in-Chief; the structural separateness that had allowed the Bengal Army to develop its own culture was ended

C. Social and Political Consequences

- **Abandonment of social reform:** after 1857, the colonial government became explicitly conservative on social reform questions; the policy of non-interference with Indian religious customs, promised in the Queen's Proclamation, was used to justify inaction on caste, child marriage, and female education; the reform impulse moved from the state to Indian civil society
- **Taluqdar restoration in Awadh:** the post-revolt settlement of Awadh deliberately restored taluqdari rights as a political reward for those who had remained loyal and as a conservative bargain for the rest; the **Court of Wards** was created to manage taluqdars' estates when they were minors or incompetent; this restored Awadh's feudal structure more thoroughly than the nawabi had maintained it
- **The "Divide and Rule" intensification:** the British drew explicit lessons about playing communities against each other — Sikh against Muslim, Gurkha against Brahmin, princely states against territories; the administrative framework after 1857 systematically built on these divisions

- **Indian nationalism as a consequence:** paradoxically, 1857's failure accelerated Indian nationalism; the educated classes who had not joined the revolt drew the conclusion that India needed a *different* form of political organisation — constitutional, educated, modern — not the restoration of feudal and Mughal structures; the **Indian National Congress (1885)** emerged twenty-eight years after 1857 partly in response to its legacy

IX. THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE — WHAT WAS 1857?

This is the chapter's highest-yield analytical section. The examiner tests whether students can navigate the historiographical debate with precision.

A. The Colonial "Mutiny" Interpretation

John William Kaye (*History of the Sepoy War*, 3 vols., 1864–76) and **Colonel G.B. Malleson** (completing Kaye's work): the authoritative British colonial account; the revolt was a military mutiny caused by specific grievances (greased cartridges, general service act) exploited by reactionary landlords and religious fanatics; it had no nationalist character; it was suppressed by British military superiority and Indian loyalty; lesson: India needed firm British rule

John Strachey (*India*, 1888) and **T.R.E. Holmes**: emphasised that the revolt was limited to a small segment of northern India; the majority of Indians (Bengal, Bombay, Madras, princely states) remained loyal or indifferent; this "limited mutiny" argument was used to deny the revolt any representative character

Colonial historiography's political function: by calling 1857 a "mutiny," British historians protected the legitimacy of colonial rule — there was no "people" against whom the British had acted; only a small minority of discontented soldiers and reactionary landlords; the majority of India had chosen British rule

B. Savarkar's Nationalist Reinterpretation

V.D. Savarkar (*The Indian War of Independence, 1857*, written 1908; published 1909 in London, 1947 in India; *banned by the colonial government before publication*): the first systematic nationalist reinterpretation:

- 1857 was not a mutiny but the **First War of Independence** — a planned, coordinated, nationalist uprising against colonial rule
- The revolt had a common political objective (expulsion of the British), a common leadership (the Mughal emperor as symbolic sovereign), and a common cause (national liberation)
- Savarkar's political argument: the revolt demonstrated that Indians had always resisted colonial rule; the tradition of resistance must be continued by the nationalist movement
- **Critical assessment of Savarkar:** his "planned, coordinated" claim is overstated — the evidence for central planning before Meerut is thin; what coordination existed was local and improvised; the revolt's failure in Bengal, Bombay, and Madras undermines the "national" claim; and his Hindu nationalist framework excluded the Muslim and taluqdar leadership that was central to the revolt's actual character in Awadh

C. S.N. Sen — The Official Indian Government Account

S.N. Sen (*Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, 1957, commissioned by the Indian government for the centenary): the most careful and balanced of the major nationalist accounts:

- The revolt began as a military mutiny but acquired political and national character as it spread
- It was not a planned national uprising (Savarkar wrong) but it was not merely a military mutiny (British historians wrong)
- It represented the coming together of different grievances — military, agrarian, political — that had no single unifying ideology but a common anti-colonial direction
- The most significant finding: the revolt's failure was due to the lack of a common ideology and programme that could unite Hindus and Muslims, rural and urban, north and south; 1857 showed both the possibility and the limits of anti-colonial resistance without a modern political organisation

D. R.C. Majumdar — The Revisionist Challenge

R.C. Majumdar (*The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*, 1957): the most iconoclastic of the three centenary historians:

- Flatly rejected Savarkar's "First War of Independence" characterisation; the revolt was not a war of independence because: (a) it had no national objective — different participants had different and often conflicting objectives; (b) it was not "of India" — most of India did not participate; (c) the revolt would have re-established Mughal and taluqdar authority, not Indian independence in any modern sense
- Majumdar's assessment: the revolt was a "mutiny" in its origin and a "revolt" in its spread; it was a protest against specific colonial policies, not a nationalist uprising; the participants sought restoration of the *status quo ante* (pre-Dalhousie era), not a new political order
- **Critical assessment:** Majumdar's demolition of Savarkar's idealism was historically justified; but his own conclusion — that the revolt was "merely" a mutiny with no nationalist significance — arguably goes too far in the other direction; the political character of the Awadh resistance (Begum Hazrat Mahal's proclamations, Ahmad Ullah Shah's religious mobilisation) exceeded the "simple mutiny" characterisation

E. Eric Stokes and the Social History Approach

Eric Stokes (*The Peasant and the Raj*, 1978; *The Peasant Armed*, posthumous 1986): shifted analysis from ideology and leadership to social structure:

- The revolt's geography can be explained by agrarian social structure — specifically, by the density of recent and disruptive revenue settlements; districts with older, more stable settlements revolted less; districts with recent, high-demand settlements revolted more
- The peasant participated not because of nationalist consciousness or Mughal loyalty but because of specific local grievances (revenue demand, taluqdar dispossession, moneylender pressure) that happened to coincide with the military revolt
- Stokes introduced the concept of the "old regime" revolt: the participants sought to restore a familiar social order that colonial economic transformation had disrupted; this was conservative resistance, not revolutionary nationalism
- **Assessment:** Stokes's district-level statistical work is the most empirically grounded contribution to 1857 historiography; it explains the revolt's geography better than any ideological account; its weakness is that it underweights the specifically *political* character of the Awadh resistance