

From Revolt to Revolution: The Evolution of Resistance in Colonial India (1857–1947)

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ABSTRACT

This study traces the development of resistance in colonial India from isolated uprisings to a widespread revolutionary movement between 1857 and 1947. It contends that rather than being a full-scale national revolution, the Revolt of 1857 signalled the start of a protracted anti-colonial struggle. With the rise of political organizations like the Indian National Congress, which brought constitutional strategies and a collective political voice, opposition grew more organized in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. But in the early 20th century, radical and revolutionary nationalism—which prioritized direct action, independence, and public participation—rose to prominence due to the shortcomings of moderate politics. The paper also emphasizes how Gandhian ideology transformed resistance into a mass movement based on moral power, truth, and nonviolence. Gandhian tactics altered the concept of revolution in terms of ethics and inclusivity while involving common people in the fight. In addition, the paper takes a theoretical stance, utilizing subaltern and postcolonial methods to demonstrate that the active involvement of workers, peasants, and other oppressed groups was just as much a part of resistance as elite leadership. This study questions the strict demarcation between revolt and revolution by reinterpreting the freedom movement as an ongoing and changing process. It comes to the conclusion that a protracted, intricate, and multifaceted conflict influenced by a variety of concepts, tactics, and players led to India's independence.

Keywords: Colonial India, Resistance, Revolt of 1857, Nationalism, Extremism, Gandhian Movement, Revolution, subaltern Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The history of India's struggle against colonial rule from the 1857 rebellion until 1947 independence has variously been categorized as "revolt," "national movement," or "freedom struggle." Recent historiographical observations imply that these words oversimplify a complicated and developing resistance process. This paper, *From Revolt to Revolution: The Evolution of Resistance in Colonial India (1857–1947)*, reinterprets this long trajectory as a dynamic transformation of ideas, methods, and actors of resistance shaped by changing political, social, and economic conditions. The 1857 insurrection, often called the "First War of Independence," broke colonial authority, although its nature is disputed. Early nationalist historians emphasized its cohesive anti-colonial attitude; later researchers have noted its fragmented and locally varying nature. R. C. Majumdar emphasizes that history tells the truth from credible data (Majumdar, 1960, p. xxix), challenging ideological simplifications in 1857 interpretations. Instead of considering 1857 as a failed mutiny or a national revolution, it is more beneficial to view it as the start of a lengthy continuity of resistance that grew in scale and consciousness. The rise of organized political associations and modern nationalism changed colonial resistance after 1857. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, introducing new constitutional agitation alongside increasingly radical and aggressive opposition. This epoch has been understood differently by nationalist, Marxist, and subaltern historians, reflecting the growth of Indian historiography. Modern historiographical studies emphasize that post-independence study increasingly included "Marxist, Subaltern, and Feminist" perspectives, widening resistance beyond elite politics to encompass peasants, workers, and oppressed populations (Shaalaa, n.d.).

Changing the historical perspective is essential for rethinking resistance. Subaltern historians have stressed common people's agency, while nationalists emphasized elite leaders and urban political

institutions. Those readings undermine the concept that resistance was primarily led from above. Instead, anti-colonial struggles were centered in local grievances, economic exploitation, and cultural assertion. Thus, resistance was political, social, and cultural, embracing everyday defiance and organized movements. In the early 1900s, moderate politics gave way to mass mobilization, a turning moment. Mahatma Gandhi popularized non-cooperation and civil disobedience, making resistance a mainstream phenomenon. Revolutionary groups supported armed conflict, showing that the independence movement had various ideologies. This variety of techniques shows that the movement was a complicated mix of freedom visions. Importantly, resistance evolved from localized upheavals and irregular revolts to a coordinated and ideologically driven national movement. Rabindranath Tagore wisely observed that textbook history is often “something like a bad dream,” divorced from people’s lives (Tagore, cited in Danino, 2012, p. 1). This suggests revisiting historical narratives and recovering the diversity of experiences that inspired the freedom struggle. This paper proposes that the Indian independence movement evolved from resistance to a larger revolutionary mindset. It was a complex historical phenomenon shaped by conflicting ideologies, regional diversities, and changing socio-political settings. This paper tries to comprehend how colonial India’s resistance became a multidimensional and continuous struggle for liberation by stepping beyond revolt versus nationalism.

The Revolt of 1857: The Genesis of Resistance:

The Revolt of 1857 began India’s lengthy resistance to British colonial control. It is better to view it as the start of a culture of resistance that led to a more organized and ideologically driven national movement. Political annexations, economic exploitation, military grievances, and cultural worries created an environment of strong hatred against the British East India Company, leading to the revolt. The movement started as a military mutiny among Indian sepoys but swiftly spread to peasants, artisans, and displaced rulers. The introduction of greased cartridges reflected deeper anxieties of religious and cultural influence. According to contemporary sources, British policies caused religious anxiety and skepticism among Indians due to European inventions (Fletcher, 1911, p. 423). To limit the revolt to a cartridge reaction ignores its structural origins, such as land confiscation, high taxation, and the Doctrine of Lapse, which eroded indigenous political authority. Historians argue about the revolt’s nature. Colonial historians called it the “Sepoy Mutiny,” highlighting its military origins and discipline breakdown. Nationalists like V. D. Savarkar saw it as a revolutionary battle that knew no truce, save liberty or death (Savarkar, 1909/2019, p. 215). The revolt’s ideological aspect is highlighted as an early demonstration of collective resistance against foreign rule. Modern historiography warns against taking either extreme without critical analysis.

The insurrection “was neither ‘first’, nor ‘national,’ nor ‘a war of independence’” (Majumdar, 1957, p. xvii), according to R. C. Majumdar. His analysis suggests the insurrection lacked a national mentality due to its fragmentation and regional focus. Although essential, this assessment does not lessen 1857’s historical significance. Instead, it shows that the revolution was a transitional event in the evolution of a national political identity. Primary sources also show the revolt’s diverse motivations. Rani Lakshmibai’s defiance— “I shall not surrender my Jhansi!”—typified local rulers’ opposition to British intrusion. Dalrymple (2006) suggests that the East India Company was the true rebel, violating previous political agreements (p. 397). Such interpretations question the colonial narrative and redefine the rebellion as a response to imperial violence rather than insubordination. The revolution also showed that imperial India’s resistance was multicultural. Sepoys opposed military injustices, peasants rejected economic exploitation, and dispossessed aristocrats sought power. This diversity of motives explains the revolt’s strength and weakness. It failed because it lacked centralized leadership and a defined ideological framework despite spreading swiftly over North India. Despite its suppression, the 1857 Revolt had lasting effects. It ended East India Company rule and gave the British Crown direct control over India. It inspired future generations with its great legacy of resistance. After a fractured insurrection, 1857 became a core story of anti-colonial resistance for succeeding nationalist movements. The Revolt of 1857 began a political awakening and collective defiance in colonial India, not a national revolution. It showed the vulnerabilities of colonial power, the potential for mass mobilization, and the beginning of a more cohesive and sustained independence movement from dispersed revolts.

Consolidation of Colonial Power and Repressive Measures:

The suppression of the Revolt of 1857 changed British control in India, consolidating colonial power through military force, administrative reorganization, and legal persecution. The British response changed imperial governance from flexible mercantile rule under the East India Company to centralized and autocratic under the British Crown. The Government of India Act of 1858 formalized this power

transfer and increased control over Indian society. Following the revolt, the British took strong repressive measures to prevent future resistance. Military repression included harsh reprisals against insurgents and civilians. To deter others, entire towns suspected of aiding the uprising were demolished and mass executed. Recent sources describe the extent of brutality, including “mass executions with rebels hanging from trees lining roads”. Punishment and psychological manipulation were meant to induce fear and reinforce colonial power. The colonial state used severe punishments, including cannon executions, to terrorize dissidents. The British also worked to demolish the social and political systems that had facilitated the insurrection. Traditional elites who supported the uprising lost their lands. Land grabs in Awadh disturbed power relations and reshaped rural society for colonial objectives. This restructure was part of a larger plan to undercut indigenous authority and win over a new class of British-dependent middlemen. British rule was maintained by “playing on the fears of some and the hopes of others” (Rai, 1916, p. 45), a technique that intensified after 1857.

Legal and administrative procedures helped consolidate colonial rule. The British used law more coercively to control the population. Cohn’s observation that the colonial state may become “not-so-benevolent Old Testament avengers” in times of crisis shows the depth of this change (Cohn, as cited in ProQuest, n.d., p. 1). Emergency laws, increased enforcement, and monitoring were used to repress opposition. Later scholars called this “lawfare” a systematic endeavour to govern by legal pressure rather than consent, institutionalizing repression in colonial administration. To avert another major rebellion, the British reformed the military. The ratio of British to Indian soldiers rose, and recruiting tactics favoured empire-loyal communities. British dominance over artillery and critical sites was maintained. These modifications showed a great suspicion of Indian soldiers and an effort to make the army a reliable colonial tool rather than a rebel source. The ideological aspect of colonial consolidation was important. The British portrayed 1857 as a “mutiny” rather than justifiable opposition to control the narrative. Government histories and schools shaped subsequent generations’ understanding of the event. The outbreak was commonly called “a revolt of soldiery, not a rebellion of a people” (Dodd, 1859, p. 312). These narratives downplayed social engagement in the revolution and justified British rule as vital for order. After 1857, colonial rule was consolidated by violence, legislation, administration, and ideology. These steps restored British control but revealed colonial coercion. The escalation of repression sparked additional discontent and enabled future resistance movements. Thus, the post-1857 period was not just stable but a key period in which colonialism’s tensions became more apparent, leading to a more organized and prolonged campaign for independence.

Emergence of Organized Nationalism:

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Rise of Extremism and Revolutionary Nationalism:

The term Extremism and revolutionary nationalism in the early 20th century changed India’s anti-colonial struggle. Moderate leaders who believed in constitutional procedures dominated organized nationalism in the past, but their failure to secure political achievements led to a more forceful and militant type of resistance. This transformation was gradual and caused by frustration with British rule, economic hardship, and the awareness that petitions and appeals alone could not change things. Therefore, a new generation of leaders and activists advocated direct action, self-reliance, and even military struggle. The partition of Bengal in 1905 sparked nationalist passion and widespread resistance. Extremists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai promoted Swaraj as a political goal. Instead of believing in British goodness, they urged mass engagement and self-sacrifice, unlike moderates. Extremism was based on the belief that “political rights will have to be fought for” (Tilak, as stated in GK Scientist, 2020), a clear shift from passive protest to active struggle. This new approach made nationalism a force of courage, action, and popular mobilization. Extremist nationalism was also fuelled by socioeconomic and political conditions. Famines, repressive laws, and racial discrimination revealed colonial exploitatively, eroding faith in British justice. According to historical analyses, militant nationalism emerged from the realization that colonial governance was oppressive and unchangeable. This realization led nationalists to use boycotts, swadeshi, and passive resistance to undermine colonial power’s economic and administrative foundations.

Parallel to this ideological shift, revolutionary nationalism emerged as a more radical freedom movement strand. Revolutionaries in Bengal and Maharashtra believed armed resistance was necessary to overthrow British rule. Political assassinations, bombings, and secret societies were their activities. Though small, these actions inspired youth defiance and sacrifice. Revolutionary thinkers like V. D. Savarkar advocated calmness in preparation but boldness in execution in times of crisis. Revolutionary nationalism distinguished itself from moderate and extremist approaches by emphasizing disciplined militancy. Extremism also grew alongside a belief in mass power. Extremist leaders rallied students, workers, and peasants, unlike early nationalists, who were mostly educated elites. They realized that true independence required popular participation and cooperation. According to militant nationalism studies, extremists believed in “the capacity of the masses to challenge authority” and valued personal sacrifice for the nation. This marked a significant departure from earlier forms of resistance and laid the groundwork for the mass movements that would emerge under Gandhi in later years. However, the rise of extremism also revealed internal tensions within the nationalist movement. The split between moderates and extremists in the Indian National Congress highlighted differences in strategy, ideology, and leadership. While moderates continued to advocate gradual reform, extremists pushed for immediate and decisive action. Despite these differences, both groups contributed to the broader goal of independence by expanding the scope and intensity of resistance.

In this context, the emergence of extremism and revolutionary nationalism can be seen as a crucial stage in the evolution of resistance in colonial India. It marked the transition from cautious political engagement to a more assertive and, at times, confrontational struggle against colonial rule. By emphasizing self-reliance, mass participation, and the legitimacy of direct action, this phase redefined the meaning of nationalism and prepared the ground for the later transformation of the freedom movement into a sustained revolutionary struggle. Thus, extremism did not merely challenge colonial authority; it reshaped the very character of resistance, bringing India closer to the realization of independence.

Gandhian Transformation: From Resistance to Mass Revolution:

The Gandhian era of the Indian freedom fight transformed resistance from elite politics and sporadic activism to a morally motivated popular movement. In the second decade of the 20th century, Mohandas

Karamchand Gandhi entered Indian politics with a new philosophy of resistance based on truth (satya) and nonviolence (ahimsa). This change helped turn anti-colonial resistance into a widespread revolution involving millions of Indians across regions, classes, and communities. Gandhi's method centered on satyagraha, which he characterized as "holding on to Truth" (Gandhi, 1921/1961, p. 1). Satyagraha stressed morality and collective non-cooperation over petitions or violence. Gandhi thought that colonial rule depends on the permission of the governed, therefore resistance may work if people refuse. Gandhi believed that government is only feasible if people consent to it (Gandhi, 1914/2006, p. 35). This revelation shifted the fight against colonialism from physical to moral and psychological opposition. The Gandhian transformation included unparalleled mass mobilization. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and Quit India Movement (1942) engaged peasants, workers, women, and students. Gandhi's basic but effective methods—boycotting foreign goods, refusing taxes, and peaceful protests—enabled popular participation. Gandhi "turned nationalism into a mass movement" by integrating politics into daily life, according to Judith Brown (Brown, 1991, p. 197). Resistance was democratized, unlike earlier eras when only educated elites participated in politics. Gandhian resistance was ethically grounded. Gandhi believed in the unity of means and objectives, stating that they are inextricably linked like seeds and trees (Gandhi, 1909/2010, p. 79). This principle set him apart from moderate constitutionalism and revolutionary violence. Gandhi believed violence would contaminate the struggle and replicate the structures of dominance it intended to overthrow. He advocated intentional suffering as a method of resistance, thinking it may awaken the oppressor's conscience and strengthen the oppressor's morality. Gandhi's strategy was unique, according to contemporary and later experts. Nonviolent opposition undermines power, particularly public obedience and cooperation, according to Gene Sharp (Sharp, 2006, p. 84). Modern interpretations claim Gandhi's strategy gave politics a "moral imperative," turning resistance into ethical action rather than political opposition. This moral dimension gave the movement national credibility and worldwide sympathy, putting pressure on the British government that earlier resistance could not. However, the Gandhian transformation had drawbacks. Some revolutionary nationalists thought nonviolence was too idealistic and undervalued colonial strength. After the 1922 Chauri Chaura incident, nationalists argued over movement suspension. Despite these accusations, Gandhi's influence remains significant. Instead, they emphasize the multiplicity of freedom struggle techniques. The Gandhian period was crucial to colonial India's resistance. It organized fragmented and violent resistance into a morally inspired mass movement. Gandhi characterized revolution as a gradual and collective assertion of moral and political liberty by merging ethics and politics. Thus, Gandhian transformation linked resistance and revolution, creating the groundwork for India's 1947 independence.

Theoretical Reinterpretation: From Revolt to Revolution:

The theoretical reframing of India's anti-colonial fight from "revolt" to "revolution" marks a major movement in modern historiography from descriptive narratives to analytical analysis of resistance. Earlier interpretations—particularly colonial and early nationalist accounts—viewed events like the Revolt of 1857 as isolated disturbances or heroic but incomplete independence efforts. Modern scholarship emphasizes that these actions were part of a longer, growing process in which resistance gained intellectual depth, organizational coherence, and popular engagement. This analysis suggests that revolt and revolution are a continuum molded by historical conditions. Ranajit Guha's critique of colonial and nationalist narratives' elitist bias was crucial to this reinterpretation. Traditional historiography reduced popular movements to reactions or "pre-political" occurrences, Guha claimed (Guha, 1983, p. 3). Such theories neglected the "consciousness of the subaltern" and their active participation in making history, later perspectives highlight. Guha reinvented resistance as a continuous and important political activity by emphasizing peasant insurgencies and grassroots movements. This perspective shows the Revolt of 1857 as part of a larger resistance pattern that emerged throughout time. Subaltern historians also note that colonial India's opposition was divided into elite and subaltern politics. Subaltern resistance was spontaneous, localized, and rooted in everyday oppression, unlike elite nationalism, which centered on constitutional tactics and leadership. These movements were expressions of a "transformative consciousness" that attempted to challenge dominance, according to Guha (Dhanagare, 1988, p. 180). Reinterpreting the revolt-to-revolution shift requires understanding the cumulative and layered character of resistance.

Marxist and postcolonial scholars have contextualized Indian resistance within class struggle and imperial dominance, furthering this theoretical change. Peasant and worker revolts constituted structural contradictions in colonial society, according to this view. These battles became politicized, and organized nationalism and Gandhian mass movements made resistance a revolutionary process. Revolution is

viewed as a historical product of ongoing struggle, rather than a sudden rupture. A significant part of this reinterpretation is criticizing linear and stage-based history paradigms. Historiography used to think civilizations progressed from primal revolt to mature nationalism. According to subaltern scholars, such theories create artificial hierarchies and ignore the simultaneity of multiple forms of resistance. Subaltern historiography “rejected all stagiist theories of Indian history” and emphasized various political action forms, according to recent studies. We can better grasp how revolutionary awareness emerged unevenly across areas and communities with this approach. The shift from revolt to revolution also rethinks revolution. Modern research views revolution as nonviolent resistance, cultural assertion, and intellectual mobilization, not just violent upheaval. Gandhi showed that revolution can be achieved via public participation and moral force, not war. This larger definition of revolution matches the Indian experience, where moderate, radical, revolutionary, and nonviolent techniques interacted to gain freedom. Importantly, this theoretical change emphasizes how memory and narrative shape historical understanding. The transition of 1857 from a colonial “mutiny” to a symbol of resistance in nationalist and postcolonial narratives shows how historical events are reinterpreted. Each reassessment reflects fresh facts and political and philosophical shifts. Thus, studying resistance in colonial India involves studying how previous events are remembered, portrayed, and reinvented.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the history of resistance in colonial India between 1857 and 1947 shows a slow but significant shift from isolated uprisings to a widespread revolutionary movement. This research has demonstrated that the Revolt of 1857 was the start of a protracted and developing anti-colonial movement rather than a singular event. It revealed the shortcomings of colonial rule and laid the groundwork for further resistance, despite its lack of cohesion and a distinct national consciousness. In the decades that followed, radical and revolutionary groups increased the intensity and urgency of the conflict, while organized nationalism gave political demands shape and direction. The most important turning point was the Gandhian era, which transformed resistance into a popular movement based on moral values and group involvement. It reinvented the notion of revolution in terms that were inclusive and nonviolent, putting common people at the center of the conflict. The coexistence of moderate, radical, and revolutionary forms of opposition at the same time demonstrated that the road to independence was neither straightforward nor consistent. The significance of reinterpreting history using contemporary theoretical viewpoints is also emphasized in this essay. It is evident from going beyond conventional narratives that resistance in colonial India was a multifaceted, ongoing activity influenced by a variety of characters, concepts, and experiences. Therefore, it is important to view the shift from revolt to revolution as a continuous development of political consciousness, organization, and unity rather than as an abrupt change. This protracted and intricate evolution of resistance ultimately led to India's independence in 1947, which reflected the country's people's aspirations and efforts.

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