

The Rebel Army in 1857

At the Vanguard of the War of Independence or a Tyranny of Arms?

Debate persists as to the role of the Company's soldiers in the events of 1857. There were several regiments that were at the head of the resistance against the British, but as this paper argues, in very many instances, their resistance was not representative of wider class and caste interests. A reading of the mutiny across its many centres reveals that the sepoys' resistance, while largely unplanned and even spontaneous, did not reflect the desire to reimpose the traditional order of things, or to even espouse the interests of the old peasant society from which many of them, especially those in the Bengal army, hailed. Moreover, there were also signs that the institutions or the initial order the sepoys sought to establish in centres such as Delhi or Gwalior were more "democratic" and egalitarian in character.

SABYASACHI DASGUPTA

This paper argues that the "mutiny" by the sepoys was an act of repudiation not only against the East India Company or Company but also the traditional ruling class of Indian society. It was an assertion of autonomous power, a force that threatened to sweep away symbols of colonial power in northern India. It also threatened to alter traditional power equations in indigenous society. The nature of the outbreak and the rapidly evolving political dynamics during the course of the mutiny represented a severe threat to established hierarchies in indigenous society. The sepoys sought to rapidly carve out an autonomous space for themselves within the power hierarchy.

There has been the argument that the sepoy assertion was not synonymous with people's power. That the autonomy of the sepoys did not represent the autonomy of the people. This paper seeks to differ with these representations and places the sepoys at the vanguard of the people's rebellion. Historians have argued that the grievances of the sepoys merged with those of the people or the peasantry. Some have gone so far as to say that the sepoys were peasants in uniform.

I argue that the sepoys despite their strong links with their parent society possessed a distinct identity and considered themselves apart from indigenous society. Company service, which they were to so violently repudiate in 1857, conversely gave them a sense of empowerment. The sepoys aspired to be the new elite and were ready to take on the old elite and the common peasantry in this endeavour. One must remember that the Bengal sepoy, usually of high caste origins, came from a middle farmer background and hardly belonged to the elite of indigenous society. A perusal of the class and caste base of the Bengal would help elucidate this point better.

Caste and Class Composition of the Bengal Army

The Bengal army or more specifically its infantry units consisted mainly of high caste men from Awadh and Bihar.¹ The Company's main catchments area corresponded to modern day eastern Uttar Pradesh and the Bhojpur region of present day Bihar.

The Bengal army's recruiting policy was motivated by strong and enduring beliefs which held that the high caste sepoy hailing from a yeoman farmer background was naturally obedient, faithful, brave and constituted in general excellent soldier material.² Though the 1830s and 1840s would see the increasing representation of Gorkhas and Sikhs in the Bengal army, high caste domination would be intact in the years leading up to 1857. If the caste composition of the 34th regiment infantry stationed at Meerut prior to 1857 is taken as representative of general recruitment patterns in the Bengal army, high castes still comprised over 50 per cent of the Bengal army.³

The general mode of recruitment was to ask serving sepoys and officers leaving for their native village on furlough, to bring back high caste recruits from among their relatives and neighbours. The induction of Sitaram into the Bengal army is an apt example. Sitaram was born in the village of Tilowee in erstwhile Oudh and modern UP in 1797. His father was a yeoman farmer who owned about 150 acres of land. Sitaram joined the army in 1812 at the behest of his uncle who was a jemedar in the Bengal army.⁴ The uncle had been granted six months of furlough and on his way home stayed with Sitaram's family for some days. He soon settled into a routine of every evening narrating wondrous tales about the lands Company service had taken him to and of the immense prosperity of the Company to a crowd of awestruck listeners including his nephew. Sitaram was filled with wonderment at these stories and longed for the time when he might be a soldier in the Company army. As Sitaram says:

The rank of *Jemedar*, I looked on as quite equal to that of Ghazi-ud-din Hyder the king of Oudh himself, in fact of even more importance. He had such a splendid necklace of gold beads and above all he appeared to have an unlimited supply of gold *mohurs*. I longed for the time when I would possess the same which I then thought would be directly mine if I became the company bahadur's servant.⁵

His uncle observing the rapt attention with which Sitaram heard his tales, laid before him the possibility of joining the army. Sitaram jumped at the prospect of enlisting in the army despite

knowing that his mother who wished him to become a priest would object strenuously. The uncle left for his native village 50 miles away saying that he would enquire on Sitaram on his way to rejoining his regiment on the expiration of his furlough. If Sitaram was still steadfast in his resolve then he would take the boy along with him with the intention of enlisting him in his own regiment.⁶

Sitaram's narrative makes it amply clear that the Bengal army was in some measure a closed institution where ties of caste, clan and residence predominated. Village life and ties were to an extent replicated in the army as the native recruits made their own living arrangements by constructing huts in a manner not very different from their native villages. All this ensured that the sepoys retained strong links with their parent society. Regular visits home on furlough to visit their families, which they had left behind, also ensured a periodic regeneration of their contact and affinity with their parent society.

The Sepoy: A Peasant in Uniform?

The strong links of the sepoys with their parent society coupled with their middle farmer origins have led historians such as Rudrangshu Mukherjee to argue that the sepoys were basically peasants in uniform. Mukherjee asserts that the participation of the peasantry in 1857 assumes greater significance as the sepoys were after all peasants with close ties with their kin in the villages. According to him, this ensured that the peasantry often took on autonomous initiatives shedding their subordinate status. He argues that this is why landed magnates like Beni Madho for instance were persuaded by the sepoys and his clansmen to continue fighting.⁷

Mukherjee's notion appears simplistic. While there is no doubt that the sepoy had significant links with his parent society, he does not take into account the fact that army life and training must have moulded his mentality to an extent. This is true for all professional armies and the Bengal army was no exception. Huntington for instance argues that the members of the same profession exhibit a notion of organic unity and conceive of themselves as a group distinct from laymen, in this case the civilian. This sense of unity ensures that an index of professional competence and responsibility is created. Huntington in short is thus attempting to define "corporateness", the creation of a distinct soldier identity or what is often defined as a corporate identity.⁸

I seek to demonstrate that the recruitment policy of the Bengal army would ensure that the Bengal sepoy would develop a hybrid identity. His separation from his parent society would be imperfect. He was neither a peasant in uniform nor did he perceive himself as totally distinct or cut off from his parent society. He had multiple identities and it was the uniqueness of the situation, which led him to assert a particular aspect of his identity. After all, his conflict was not only with the colonial government, he was also jockeying for power within his own parent society. When it came to it, he would emphasise the fact that he was a Company sepoy, a truism which rendered him distinct and possibly antagonistic to his parent society despite his strong links with it.

This antagonism would be revealed in his active conflicts with both the non-privileged peasantry and the native elite. The sepoys were a terror to all sections of society. They often misused their access to the British resident of Lucknow with the intent of establishing fraudulent claims. Sleeman mentions an invalid

subedar, Sheik Mehboob Ali, who acquired a village from a great landlord by influencing the resident, thereby establishing his claim on it. Company service was thus giving him a leeway, status and influence, which he could not otherwise aspire to. The sepoy on his part was determined to make the best possible use of the advantages Company service offered to him.⁹

Sitaram's autobiography also gives us a vivid picture of the leverage Company service offered to the sepoys. Sitaram while narrating the circumstances, which led to him joining the Bengal army, says that his father was hardly averse to the idea though his mother was terribly upset at the prospect of Sitaram being drafted into the army. His father was anticipating a prospective legal battle over a mango grove the family owned. Evidently serving sepoys hailing from Oudh could ensure through the good offices of the British resident in Lucknow that cases involving them and their families would be promptly heard in the courts; a privilege ordinary members of indigenous society were denied.¹⁰

The Sepoys: The New Elite?

The sepoys therefore sought to be the new elite. Service in the Company had emboldened and empowered him. He represented a dynamic force, which sought to dominate the indigenous society from where he originated and to which he belonged despite his often acrimonious relations with his parent society. The mutiny of the sepoys could thus not be equated or treated as synonymous with a people's rebellion as some historians have sought to portray it. Rajat Ray, for instance, says that the mutiny by the sepoys lay at the very heart of the people's rebellion and was the most democratic part of the rebellion. Ray argues that the sepoys were not simply peasants in uniform; army service gave him a perspective wider than the tiny world of the average villager. The average peasant rebellion before 1857 and till the 1920s, Ray argues, was limited and local in nature and sought to base itself on kinship ties. Ray posits that the peasantry led by the sepoys would strive towards forms of government, which contained a democratic and republican spirit within what he terms as its hierarchical, princely structure.¹¹

Ray posits that these sepoys asserted an autonomous zone of power for the people by being a decisive voice in the restoration of indigenous authority in areas, which had been liberated from British rule. Ray says that though the sepoys entertained no thoughts of setting themselves up as the government, they insisted on having the final say. Ray shows how the ex-nawab of Banda had to appease the mutineers after he had summararily assumed power. The nawab placated them by inviting them to a feast and acknowledging their right to have the final say in all matters. Similarly Ray says that the sepoys played a crucial role in the restoration of Lakshmibai in Jhansi. The sepoys were in two minds actually after a dispute with Lakshmibai's delegates. Sadashiv Rao, a kinsman of Lakshmibai's late husband had also staked his claim to the throne of Jhansi and these sepoys were toying with the idea of preferring his claims over the rani. Ray demonstrates that the latter ultimately secured her claim by paying the sepoys a large sum of money. Ray also argues that the sepoys set up councils through which they exercised power in their centres of power such Lucknow, Delhi etc.¹²

I argue that the revolt of the people could not be termed as a revolt of the people with the sepoys as flag-bearers. The sepoys during 1857 were a force by themselves. They were neither with

the people nor were they really interested in restoring the old symbols of power. Years of Company service had given them the confidence to cast aside their traditional servitude to make bold and assertive statements. They had not acquired the confidence to totally repudiate the old order. They possibly felt that they lacked the legitimacy to do so in the eyes of the people. But they were no longer in awe of traditional figures of authority. These sepoys for the time being needed the support of the people and traditional ruling class. At the same time they had a measure of contempt for both sections.

This was exemplified by their behaviour towards the general populace. The mutineers at Delhi were often at loggerheads with the people of Delhi. They were especially hard on merchants, moneylenders and bankers and did not spare the common people either. Their exactions reached such unmanageable proportions that people pledged to protect themselves against the mutineers. Shopkeepers disgusted with the exactions of the sepoys refused to open their shops and flooded the emperor with complaints. The emperor had to implore the shopkeepers to open their shops. Yet the shopkeepers could hardly gather the courage to do so. The atmosphere was one of dread; the people, the great and the common, lived in terror of being at the receiving end of the sepoy's frustration and caprice.¹³

Jeevan Lal's diary narrates an incident where the sepoys after a disastrous defeat against the British vented their frustration at Bahadur Shah's physician, Ahsanullah Khan whom they had long suspected of being in league with the British. The palace was surrounded and there were cries for Ahsanullah Khan's head. Alarmed at the conduct of the sepoys, the shopkeepers closed their shops. Jeevan Lal says that the Muslim section of the city feared that the sepoys would murder Bahadur Shah Zafar and indulge in a general massacre.¹⁴

Such fears were by no means unfounded as the sepoys were prone to violence at the slightest provocation. May 21, still early days as far as the rebel presence in Delhi was concerned, witnessed the massacre of innocent citizens. The ostensible provocation was the looting of valuables from the sepoys by 'budmashes' or bad characters of the city who waylaid them in a particular mohalla of Delhi. The sepoys peeved at being robbed took their anger out on the innocent people of the locality and indulged in a large-scale massacre.¹⁵

Therefore it is time that romantic notions of sepoys being at the vanguard of the people's rebellion are shed. The sepoys were on their own with their own agenda though for tactical reasons they could not do without the support of the people or other traditional figureheads. They had to contend with a society, which retained a huge respect for traditional symbols of authority. But they looked to be the decisive force or the final authority as far as decision-making was concerned. As a result sepoy councils sprang up in centres of rebel power such as Delhi and Lucknow. The sepoys exercised decisive power through these councils, though Bahadur Shah Zafar in Delhi or Begum Hazrat Mahal in Lucknow were the ultimate authority on paper. The court as it was called in Delhi, for instance, was formed after the arrival of Bakht Khan in the capital. It was to consist of 10 members, six from the army and four from the civilian administration. All three branches of the army would have equal representation. Members were to be elected by a majority with the criteria supposedly being intelligence, merit and experience. One out of these 10 members was to be elected president by a majority vote. Individual members of the court would be accountable or the

respective departments from which they were elected. They would in turn be assisted by committees.¹⁶

The court held regular sessions for five hours each day in the Red Fort while, extraordinary sessions could be convened at any time of the day or night. All decisions had to be arrived at by majority vote. The court's jurisdiction extended to matters of finance, judicial and of course military. The court was authorised to impose taxes or to establish law courts, appoint judges and police officers. All decisions had to be ratified by the emperor and had to bear his will. If the emperor disagreed with any decision he could send it back to the court for its reconsideration.¹⁷

In reality it was the sepoys who had the final word. The emperor was often compelled to sign and ratify the decisions of the newly established court. Bahadur Shah in his defence before the trial constituted to try him professed his absolute haplessness before the will of the sepoys. The sepoys apparently were in the habit of affixing his seal on empty envelopes, the contents of which he was absolutely unaware. While the emperor for tactical reasons may have been overstating his impotence before the sepoys, the fact remains that the sepoys at the moment felt emboldened enough to dictate terms to anybody. Possibly the sheer exhilaration of having risen en masse and having actually wiped out for a while the feared Company rule over large parts of north India gave them a big psychological boost. They had crossed an important psychological barrier. This was not the first time that the sepoys had rebelled. A culture of *quid pro qui* had long prevailed in the Company armies. The sepoys rendered conditional allegiance in return for certain sentiments being honoured and certain obligations being fulfilled towards them. Non-compliance of these obligations or the disregarding of their sentiments meant that they were rendered free from the need to accord deference. Thus, a mutiny under certain circumstances was considered legitimate by the sepoys and did not constitute indiscipline.¹⁸

But 1857 was different. Earlier mutinies had been local and limited in their scope and vision. They had not looked to challenge the legitimacy of British rule with the possible exception of the Vellore mutiny. But this was different. This was a challenge to the basic foundations of British rule in at least the northern part of India. Caught in the first flush of success the sepoys were in a state of frenzy and brooked no opposition. A strong streak of defiance and assertion was evident in the sepoys who rebelled. This was revealed at multiple levels. It was, for instance, revealed in the manner in which the sepoys asserted their right to elect their own officers. The sepoys revived old practices such as the 'panch' or panchayat. These were democratic bodies where decisions were arrived at by consensus regarding the course each regiment should take.

The Gwalior contingent, for instance, which rebelled on June 14, elected a subedar major of the First Regiment to be their general. These troops without bothering to elicit the consent of their native officers marched to Gwalior where they demanded of Scindia his plans regarding the future course of action. These sepoys evidently spent their time in convening a panchayat and courts and organising deputations to Scindia which the latter had no choice but to entertain. Finally on July 7, a big contingent of sepoys and officers attended on Scindia in the palace gardens and demanded an assurance from him. When Scindia asked them what their wishes were, the officers professed to reply but the sepoys interrupted and told the maharajah that they decided to capture Agra and that they would not further wait for his orders.¹⁹

The revolt of the sepoys also seemed to envisage in its vision, resentment against their native officers who on the face of it were at the mercy of the sepoys. Possibly the sepoys had resented the fact that the native officers invariably sided with the European officers in clamping down on cases of day-to-day dissent. Native officers had a curiously dichotomous attitude. Previous localised mutinies had often found the native officers acquiescing in the revolt of the sepoys or in certain instances providing the lead to the revolt though, as mentioned before, the native officer sided with the authorities when it came to stamping out cases of day-to-day dissent by sepoys.²⁰ 1857 was different in the sense it was the average sepoy who held sway. The rebellion was a manifestation of his multifold resentment, which enveloped in its anger multiple layers of hierarchy. No figure was hallowed for them, the sepoy's anger and arrogance would not spare even the emperor.

There were reports that the sepoys, clamouring to be paid, addressed the Mughal emperor in disrespectful terms ('Ari Badshah' or even 'Ari Buddha'). Some were bold enough to pull him by the hand while one apparently tugged his beard asking him to listen. The sepoys even possessed the audacity to demand the queen Zeenat Mahal as a hostage since they suspected her along with Bahadur Shah's physician Ahsanullah Khan of being in league with the British. As for Ahsanullah Khan their anger against him has already been mentioned. The sepoys on one occasion burst into his apartments and looted it. Ahsanullah Khan luckily for him was not present at the time.²¹

The mutineers as we saw were hardly respectful in their attitude towards Scindia. Their tone towards him was peremptory; they were attempting to dictate terms to him. While they did not attempt to totally cast aside his authority, they would accept his nominal suzerainty on their own terms. Times had changed at least temporarily. The traditional elite could no longer hope to command without their power being questioned and challenged. They were up against a force which had developed irreverence for them. The mutineer's contempt for traditional authority was further revealed by their behaviour during the coronation of Birjis Qadr as the consort of Lucknow. The sepoys crowded into the palace and apparently made a general nuisance of themselves. They noisily commented on the appearance of Birjis Qadr, some drew mocking parallels with the god Krishna, others urged him

not to succumb to the pleasures of wine and women. There were some who heaped contempt on him for his timid and timorous appearance. One sepoy overwhelmed with emotion went so far as to embrace him and address him as Krishna.²²

In the tradition-bound society such manifestations of arrogance and familiarity would be unthinkable. But this was a sepoy army which had been unshackled. Years of Company service had already made them force to be reckoned with in indigenous society. The revolt temporarily made them masters of the situation. Their ardour was yet undiminished by serious reverses; these were the initial moments of heady triumph. The sepoys felt that they could dictate terms to anybody.

Conclusions

To conclude one might ask as to what was the significance of the mutiny? If the sepoy rebellion did not represent the rebellion of the people then what did it represent? Why do we celebrate the revolt as the first war of independence? Why should not we celebrate say the Santhal and the Moplah uprisings or for that matter countless other uprisings? Why are their 150th anniversaries not commemorated? 2006 was for instance the 200th anniversary of the Vellore mutiny, a mutiny which sparked off disturbances in several places in the Madras Presidency. Unlike 1857 the British could nip these disturbances easily in the bud. Strangely celebrations of the Vellore mutiny were muted. One reason could be that the Vellore mutiny remained local and could not spread to other parts of Madras Presidency as the British clamped down on the burgeoning disturbances at other centres before they could acquire momentum. Therein lies the point. 1857 was unchallenged in its scope, vision and magnitude. The sheer breadth of the area and the sheer savagery of the conflict were unrivalled. The uprising would pose a fundamental challenge to British rule in northern India and would generate a romance and a process of mystification, which endures to this day.

However, the question that arises is: Are we then to assume that the only significance of the mutiny by the sepoys lay in the fact that it was unprecedented in its range and conception? One would argue to the contrary. The sepoy rebellion had some progressive features in spite of its often antagonistic relations

SPECIAL ISSUE

GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN KARNATAKA

February 24, 2007

Governance and the 'Karnataka Model of Development'

– Gopal Kadekodi, Ravi Kanbur, Vijayendra Rao

Change in Karnataka over the Last Generation: Villages and the Wider Context

– James Manor

Political Economy of Panchayats in South India

– Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande, Vijayendra Rao

Dynamics of Local Governance in Karnataka

– Kripa Ananthpur

Federalism, Urban Decentralisation and Citizen Participation

– Ramesh Ramanathan

Systematic Hierarchies and Systemic Failures:

Gender and Health Inequities in Koppal District

– Gita Sen, Aditi Iyer, Asha George

To Be or Not to Be: Problems in Locating Women in Public Policy

– Devaki Jain

For copies write to: Circulation Manager,

Economic and Political Weekly,

Hitkari House, 6th Floor, 284, Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Mumbai 400 001.

email: circulation@epw.org.in

with the people. The very fact that they represented a challenge to the old feudal elite represented a progressive feature in itself. The sepoys in their desire to pose an alternative were also proposing an alternative paradigm of government. They possibly realised that they could not hope to replicate old forms of government if they wished to mount a credible challenge. Temperamentally too years of serving in an army where they were implicitly allowed some leverage had made them assertive and confident. They were no longer used to being dictated to. This was apart from the general confidence army service gave them.

Therefore the sepoys though hardly conciliatory in their attitude towards the people were democratic within their own autonomous sphere or zone of operation. In this lies the most significant part of the sepoy rebellion. If we are to imagine a scenario where the sepoys would have prevailed, one doubts whether there would be a reversion to the old native forms of government. The very nature of the success and the huge role played by the sepoys would have ensured against this. While it is futile to talk in terms of modern notions of parliamentary democracy, it is possible that a new order would have emerged. While the new order might have represented a dictatorship of the sepoys over the people and to a lesser extent the old elite, the egalitarian strands implicit in the internal world of the sepoys would have represented a contradiction. It is possible that this contradiction would have resulted in the formation of an order which was egalitarian and if I may use the word democratic in the truest sense of the term. There lay, one feels, the true significance of 1857. **[EW]**

Email: sabyasachidasg@gmail.com

Notes

- 1 Report of the Enquiry Committee of the Barrackpore Mutiny, 1824, Military (Misc), Vol 11, p 479, NAI.
- 2 Sleeman, W H, *On The Spirit Of Military Discipline in Our Native Indian Army*, Calcutta, 1841, p 53.
- 3 G W Forrest, *Selections from the Letters, Dispatches and Other State Papers Preserved in the Military Department of the Government of India, 1857-58*, Vol 1, Calcutta, 1893, p 45.
- 4 Sitaram, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, James Lunt (ed), Translated by Lieutenant-Colonel Norgate, Lahore, 1873, Reprint, 1970, p 4.
- 5 Ibid, p 4.
- 6 Ibid, p 5.
- 7 See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Avadh in Revolt 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Penguin, Delhi, 1984.
- 8 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 1972, p 10.
- 9 W H Sleeman, *A Journey through the Kingdom of Oudh, 1849-1850, with Private Correspondence Relative to the Annexation of Oude and British India*, London, 1858, Reprint, Delhi, 1995. See Vol 1, pp 260-314, Vol 2, pp 291-314. Sleeman says that the sepoys were apt to misuse the privilege of petitioning to the resident. They used it to establish all manner of fraudulent claims on landholdings or to get their own rent reduced. They often tried to get back landholdings lost in the past by pressing fraudulent charges before the resident. This is not to say that the sepoys were totally immune to the outrages committed by big talukdars. Maheput Singh, a notorious landlord, attacked and robbed the properties of several serving and retired sepoys and native officers of the company armies. In most of these cases Maheput Singh looted and derived ransom for captured family members. In one instance he dispossessed the family of a subedar from their holdings and turned out all the cultivators. While the aggrieved sepoys and officers represented to the resident in all instances and managed to get out arrest warrants from the court of the king, Maheput Singh's influence with the local district representatives of the king ensured that he remained unmolested for a time. Maheput Singh was in some instances circumspect in attacking sepoys in serving in the Company. He encountered considerable resistance

in at least a couple of occasions. Finally he made one attack too many on a native officer of the company army. A strong force of the Oude Frontier police and a contingent led by another great talukdar Raja Man Singh was sent to accost Maheput Singh and eventually managed to capture him.

- 10 Sitaram, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, Delhi, 1970, p 5.
- 11 See Rajat Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*; see more specifically the section on 'The Mentality of the Mutiny: Conceptions of the Alternative Order in 1857', Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid. Ghalib's diary too gives us an idea of the absolute anarchy the rebel heaped Delhi. He mentions that the mutineers looted at will. Houses were without discrimination stripped of their belongings. Women with the exception of the wife and daughter of the police chief were stripped of their jewellery. Ghalib seems to imply that women in Delhi were subjects of unwelcome attention from the sepoys and what he called the rabble. While Ghalib's account has strong class bias and was written in the post-mutiny phase with an eye to exonerate him and emphasise his loyalty, its descriptions of the indiscriminate rapine and loot by the sepoys tally with other narratives. Therefore while we should approach his narrative with a critical perspective, we cannot discount its account of the sepoys' avarice altogether. See *Dastanbuy: A Diary of the Indian Revolt of 1857*, Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Translated by Khwaja Ahmed Faruqi, Bombay, 1970.
- 15 Ibid, Jeevan Lal's diary, May 21, 1857. The mutiny papers contain several petitions by ordinary people to Bahadur Shah Zafar complaining against the exactions of the mutineers. Several of the petitions were translated from Urdu for the sake of the trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar. A perusal of these petitions reveal that the mutineer's exactions were not limited to the merchants, bankers and moneyed people in general. For instance, a group of people in charge of the ice-pits supplying ice to the imperial household complained that the mutineers had encamped near their houses and subjected them to great distress. Even the timbers of the roof of their houses had been carried away. Many inhabitants fearing a danger to their lives had deserted the locality. Petition of Imam-baksh Choudhuri and all the men of the ice-pits, July 18, 1857, see *Proceedings of the Trial of Bahadur Shah, Titular King of Delhi before a Military Commission upon a Charge of Rebellion, Treason and Murder Held at Delhi*, Calcutta, 1858, Petition 33, p 21. In another instance two macebearers of the king alleged that the sepoys had forcibly occupied their dwellings, see *Petition of Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Khan, Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar*, Calcutta, 1895, Petition No 53, p 33. Durgadas Banerjee's account of his experiences in the mutiny contains several unflattering references to the sepoys and their supposed depredations. Banerjee's account mainly dwells on Bareilly and its neighbouring areas. Banerjee, a clerk in the Bengal army and a loyalist to the core describes a devastated village, which he sees while on his way to Nainital, which is still in the hands of the British. On enquiring he learns that the rebel troops had created havoc in the village and the people had fled as a result. Durgadas also affirms that the people of Bareilly were glad to see the English return. However his account has to be taken with a pinch of salt as he was a loyalist and would naturally be biased against the rebels. Having said that, we cannot totally disregard his account, as there are other comparatively neutral accounts that also point towards the fact that the soldiers were often harsh on the common people. While we should be circumspect, we cannot disregard such reports of sepoy oppression. See Durgadas Banerjee, *Amar Jivana-Charit*, Calcutta, 1924.
- 16 Mutiny Papers kept in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, Bundle 57, Fo Nos 539-541 (Urdu). These documents basically spell out the constitution of the court, its rules and organisation. I am grateful to D R Faizan Ahmed for kindly consenting to translate these documents.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 This point has been argued in Sabyasachi Dasgupta's unpublished dissertation, 'In Defence of Honour and Justice: Sepoy Rebellions in the 19th Century', Chapter 2, JNU, 2004.
- 19 Macpherson's report, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, Publications Bureau, Uttar Pradesh, 1957, Vol 2, pp 189-192.
- 20 See again Sabyasachi Dasgupta's unpublished dissertation, Chapter 5.
- 21 See Jiwan Lal's diary, *Two Narratives*, Delhi, 1898.
- 22 FSUP, Vol 2, p 140.