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Sucheta Mahajan

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Host of Midian: The Chapati Circulation and the Indian Revolt of 1857-58

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We must not forget that in the sky of India, serene as it is, a cloud may arrive, at first no bigger than a man's hand, but which growing bigger and bigger, may at last threaten to overwhelm us in ruin.¹

Chapati: an unleavened cake of bread (generally of coarse wheat meal), patted with the hand, and baked on a griddle; the usual form of native bread, and staple food of Upper India.²

Introduction

In the early months of 1857 district officials in northern India began to receive reports about an unusual event taking place in the countryside. The British were astonished to learn that 'dirty little cakes of the coarsest flour, about the size and thickness of a biscuit',³ were being passed on from one village to the next in the North-Western Provinces (NWP, modern-day Uttar Pradesh) and in central India (modern-day Madhya Pradesh). The 'mysterious' nature of this transmission was the subject of a great deal of conjecture among members of the British community in India.

The historical literature on the *chapati* circulation can be divided into two schools of thought. Some historians argue that the circulation had a definite political meaning and had a direct connection to an event that shook the very foundations of British rule in India: the 'Indian Mutiny' or Revolt of 1857-58. Other historians are of the view that the movement had no political significance and no association with the uprising of 1857. Thus a distinction can be made between those scholars who perceived the event as symptomatic of wider political undercurrents that existed

¹ An extract from a speech made by Charles Canning, Governor-General of India, at a farewell dinner given in his honour by the Board of Directors of the East India Company in London on 1 August 1855. Quoted in R. Hilton, *The Indian Mutiny: A Centenary History*, London, 1957, p. 5.

² H. Yule and A. C. Burnell, Hobson-Jobson, *A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, 2nd edition, London, 1903, p. 219.

³ M. Thornhill, *The Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate during the Rise, Progress and Suppression of the Indian Mutiny*, London, 1884, p. 2.

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in northern and central India during the first half of 1857, and those scholars who believe that the meaning of the circulation cannot be determined with any degree of precision, and who remain sceptical of claims that the *chapatis* represented a symbol or sign of armed insurrection.

John Kaye, an eminent Victorian scholar of the Revolt, asserted that 'new excitement was engendered and vague expectations were raised' as a result of the circulation. Moreover, Kaye believed that the movement could hardly have been accidental given its geographical extent and the length of its duration.⁴ Thomas Holmes claimed that the movement generated a belief amongst Indians that the British intended to destroy their religion, and that this 'belief itself had its share in unsettling men's minds'.⁵ G.B. Malleson believed that the *chapatis* were the 'hangers of the coming storm', and was convinced that these were circulated by the 'ringleaders' of the Revolt. These individuals included Nana Sahib, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad, the Rani of Jhansi and the Begam of Awadh, Hazrat Mahal. According to Malleson, the *chapatis* were used to spread discontent and to prepare the rural population for 'an impending calamity'.⁶ For George MacMunn the purpose of the *chapatis* remained vague: 'the most that could be said was that they were believed to be meant to draw people's attention to something coming.'⁷

While most historians have been reluctant to attach a specific meaning to the circulation, no such reticence can be found in the writings of those Indian historians who regarded the Revolt as a glorious patriotic struggle waged against an alien raj by Indian freedom fighters. Talmiz Khaldun has affirmed that the movement was 'in all probability' a signal to the rural population to prepare for rebellion.⁸ This interpretation has been supported by Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya who has claimed that the *chapati* was the 'virus' of the Revolt. The aim of the circulation was to 'keep the people alert over the coming storm and to prepare them for active participation in the impending revolt'.⁹ To V.D. Sarvarkar, the ardent nationalist and author of *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*, first published in 1909, the political character of the circulation was self-evident. Those delivering the *chapatis* were the 'secret messengers of Revolution'. Sarvarkar goes on to proclaim that 'the chapatee spoke only to those it meant to speak to' and that its message of rebellion inspired 'men who knew it with a strange Revolutionary energy at its very touch'.¹⁰ A.S. Mishra opted for a less extreme political interpretation. He

considered the *chapatis* to be a method used to provide information or to enlist the support of villagers for some form of insurrectionary activity.¹¹

R.C. Majumdar, P.C. Gupta and Michael Edwardes have cast doubt on the existence of a causal link between the *chapatis* and the Revolt. Majumdar, following Kaye, believes that the extent of the *chapati* distribution indicates 'a definite and widespread organisation'. Nevertheless, the circulation remained an 'enigma'.¹² Surendranath Sen remarked that it was 'doubtful whether the mysterious cake bore any evil potent'. He also expressed reservations about whether the *chapatis* had a political message given the medium used to transmit the message was unintelligible to the messengers and to other villagers.¹³ M.A. Rahim has sought to counter this assertion by claiming that the *chapatis* represented 'a silent indication of adherence to the cause'. Furthermore, the true meaning of the circulation was hidden from the British: 'no one disclosed its import to any Englishman, or to anybody associated with the government'.¹⁴

It has also been suggested that the *chapatis* acted as disease transmitters or disease scapegoats. Penderel Moon has argued that the movement arose due to the presence of cholera in India in 1857.¹⁵ According to David Arnold, the *chapatis* were used 'to pass on, or in some way afford protection against, the cholera then raging in parts of Northern India'.¹⁶ This view has been challenged by other historians, most notably J.A.B. Palmer.

C.A. Bayly has argued that British officials tended to exaggerate the extent to which traditional rural-based networks of communication could act as mechanisms to organize or to expand insurrection. In the period after 1857 many officials formed the view that the timing of the *chapati* circulation confirmed the existence of a 'Muhammadan conspiracy',¹⁷ a view propagated by nineteenth-century Victorian historians such as Malleson.

Ranjit Guha has made a valuable contribution to the literature on the movement. The subject has been covered in some depth in his monograph on peasant insurgency in colonial India. Guha argues that that circulation can be used to illustrate differences in cultural modes. Contemporary British accounts asserted that the movement formed part of a more general political conspiracy, a belief derived in no small part from an awareness of devices used for mobilization by participants in popular rural movements in Europe. Thus, according to Guha, the circulation was the subject of 'historic miscognition'. In addition, as time passed the movement

¹¹ A.S. Mishra, *Nana Sahib Peshwa and the Fight for Freedom*, Lucknow, 1961, p. 203.

¹² R.C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857*, 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 367, 377.

¹³ S. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, reprint, New Delhi, 1977, p. 398.

¹⁴ M.A. Rahim et al., *A Short History of Pakistan* (I.H. Qureshi, general ed.), Vol. 4, Karachi, 1967, p. 119.

¹⁵ P. Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, London, 1989, p. 685.

¹⁶ D. Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-century India*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 177.

¹⁷ C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 321.

⁴ J.W. Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-58*, Vol. 1, London, 1865, pp. 572-73.

⁵ T.R. Holmers, *A History of the Indian Mutiny and of the Disturbances which Accompanied it among the Civil Population*, 5th edition, London, 1898, p. 90.

⁶ G.B. Malleson, ed., *Kaye's and Malleson's History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 5, London, 1897-98, pp. 63, 280. See also *idem*, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857*, reprint, Delhi, 1988, p. 33.

⁷ G. MacMunn, *The Indian Mutiny in Perspective*, reprint, Delhi, 1985, p. 30.

⁸ Talmiz Khaldun, 'The great rebellion', in P.C. Joshi, ed., *Rebellion, 1857: A Symposium*, reprint, Calcutta, 1986, p. 25.

⁹ H. Chattopadhyaya, *The Sepoy Mutiny, 1857: A Social Study and Analysis*, Calcutta, 1987, p. 160.

¹⁰ V.D. Sarvarkar, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*, reprint, New Delhi, 1986, p. 97.

acquired a new meaning. As well as having pathological connotations, the circulation assumed a political meaning. It came to be regarded by Indians as 'a harbinger of an undefined political upheaval'. For Guha the movement represented 'a symptom of collective anxiety and uneasiness in an agrarian society poised on the brink of violent upheaval.'¹⁸

This article will analyze the structure and dynamics of the *chapati* movement. Particular attention will be paid to the British response to the *chapatis* at the time of the circulation and during the period after the Revolt, so as to provide an understanding of colonial perceptions of rural-based networks of communication. The colonial response to the 'famous *chapatis*' provides an insight into the mechanisms that the British believed could be used to initiate or foster rural insurrection. Village-based modes of communication that operated over a wide geographical area for a protracted period of time were considered to be potential or actual primers for rebellion against the state. The Indian response to the *chapatis* will also be discussed. The *chapati* circulation will also be compared to other rural-based transmissions that occurred in nineteenth-century India, and an assessment will be made as to whether or not the *chapati* acted as a cholera disease transmitter.

Mode

The only aspect of this rural phenomenon that can be determined with any degree of precision is the mode by which the *chapatis* were transmitted. The *chapatis*, said to be on average roughly 2 inches in diameter, were carried by hand or in the turban from village to village by Hindu and Muslim *chaukidars* or village watchmen.¹⁹ The recipient was requested to bake a fresh batch of *chapatis* and send them on to the next village. The actual number received and despatched in this manner varied quite markedly (see Table 1).

According to Mainodin Hasan Khan, the *thanadar* (policeman) of Paharganj *thana* located a short distance from the city of Delhi, local *chaukidars* received precise instructions on the ingredients to be used to produce the *chapatis* (barley and wheat flour), the size of the *chapatis* (equivalent to the size of the palm of a man's hand) and the weight of the *chapatis* (two *tolas*).²⁰ In some cases village *chaukidars* requested that a portion of the *chapatis* handed over to them be preserved or that a portion of the freshly baked *chapatis* be set aside. *Chapatis* preserved in this manner were apparently to be presented to the local *hakim* or kept in storage

¹⁸ R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 238-46.

¹⁹ *Chaukidars* represented the police at the village level. Their main duties consisted of reporting births and deaths, along with any other matters of interest, to the police at the local *thana* or police station.

²⁰ S.A.A. Rizvi and M.L. Bhargava, eds, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh: Source Material* (henceforth *FSUP*), Vol. 1, Kanpur, 1957, p. 393.

Table 1
Transmission of the Chapatis

Number Received	Number Delivered	Number of Villages Sent To
1	4	1
1	4	4
1	5	5
1	6	6
2	2	1
2	4	2
2	6	2
2	10	2
2	10	5
6	6	1

Source: N.A. Chick, *Annals of the Indian Rebellion, 1857-58* (David Hutchinson, ed.), London, 1974, p. 5; S.A.A. Rizvi and M.L. Bhargava, eds, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh: Source Material*, Vol. 1, Kanpur, 1957, p. 391; R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, p. 239; C. Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India, 1857*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 57; F.C. Maude and J.W. Shere, *Memoirs of the Mutiny*, Vol. 1, London, 1894, p. 20; P. Moon, *British Conquest and Dominion in India*, London, 1995, p. 685; E.H. Nolan, *The Illustrated History of the British Empire in India and the East from the Earliest Times to the Suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1859*, Vol. 2, London, n.d., p. 712; M. Thornhill, *Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate during the Rise, Progress and Suppression of the Indian Mutiny*, London, 1884, p. 2.

until 'called for'.²¹ The term *hakim* is somewhat ambiguous. It can mean a ruler or a governor, or can refer to some prominent local official. There are also reports of *chapatis* being presented to the headmen of villages or to village religious leaders.²² The circulation of the *chapatis* was not carried out as a covert or secret operation. Rather, the reverse was true: the movement was undertaken in an open and public manner. In fact, a number of *chapatis* were delivered by the *chaukidars* to local police officers for inspection.

The rapid speed at which the *chapatis* were circulated can be accounted for in part by the fact that the *chaukidars* were anxious to carry out the task in order to avoid the 'severe punishment' that might befall those who failed to distribute the *chapatis*.²³ In some instances *chaukidars* demanded verification from village authorities that they had successfully carried out the task. Receipts were demanded from *panwaris* (accountants) upon delivery of the *chapatis*. These receipts often

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

²² Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 570; E.H. Nolan, *The Illustrated History of the British Empire in India and the East from the Earliest Times to the Suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1859*, Vol. 2, London, n.d., p. 712; 'The Indian crisis of 1857', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 29, 1857, p. 410.

²³ Depositions taken at Meerut by Major G.W. Williams, Superintendent of Police, North-Western Provinces. Statement of Mohar Singh, Deputy Collector, Meerut District. Appendix to the 'Memorandum on the Mutiny and Outbreak at Meerut in May 1857', Allahabad, 15 November 1858. *India Office Home Records, Home Miscellaneous Series* (henceforth *HMS*), Vols 727-28, microfilm, reel 303, M33, f. 961. State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

had to be authenticated by police officers stationed at the local *thana*.²⁴ The request for documentation further serves to highlight the overt nature of the transmission.

There is no evidence to suggest that the *chapatis* were accompanied by a message transmitted orally or in the form of written text hidden inside the bread. MacMunn claims that the *chaukidars* greeted each other with the following utterance that appeared to resemble an incantation: 'From the south to the north, and from east to west.'²⁵ No historical sources are cited to support this assertion. Richard Collier and Richard Harris also refer to messages or religious incantations that supposedly accompanied the passage of the *chapatis*.²⁶ Reference to verbal messages also appears in fictional works on the Revolt. In *On the Face of the Waters*, a late nineteenth-century fictional account of 1857 written by Flora Annie Steel, the *chapatis* are handed over with the following message: 'For the elders. From the South to the North. From the East to the West.'²⁷

Sarvarkar has claimed that a *chaukidar* would eat a portion of a *chapati* and break up and distribute the remainder as *prasad* to any villagers who asked for it. Sarvarkar defines *prasad* as 'anything blessed by being first dedicated to God'.²⁸ However, for Hindus such a distribution would no doubt have constituted a breach of caste restrictions relating to the consumption of communal food. Furthermore, P.C. Scot, a military officer of the Bengal Native Infantry stationed at Nowgong in central India, observed that the *chapatis* were circulated by the 'hands of the very lowest caste men'.²⁹ It was also reported by the *thanadar* of Badarpur to the south of Delhi that the *chapati* circulation in the local area was also accompanied by 'goat's flesh'.³⁰ This is the only reference to such a circulation in the literature on the subject. It is therefore safe to say that if it did occur, it did not form a significant feature of the *chapati* movement.

MacMunn has suggested that the *chapatis* may be regarded as 'an alarming type of chain letter'.³¹ an analogy also made by Majumdar and Bayly. Majumdar compared and contrasted the *chapati* movement to the circulation of chain letters

²⁴ N.A. Chick, *Annals of the Indian Rebellion, 1857-58* (David Hutchinson, ed.), London, 1974, p. 5.

²⁵ MacMunn, *The Indian Mutiny*, p. 30.

²⁶ R. Collier, *The Sound of Fury: An Account of the Indian Mutiny*, London, 1963, p. 22, and J. Harris, *The Indian Mutiny*, London, 1973, p. 26.

²⁷ A.F. Steel, *On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny*, New York, 1897, p. 132. Other fictional accounts that refer to the *chapatis* include J.G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, New York, 1973; M. Malgonkar, *The Devil's Wind: Nana Saheb's Story*, New Delhi, 1988; and J. Masters, *Nightrunners of Bengal*, London, 1951.

²⁸ Sarvarkar, *The Indian War of Independence*, p. 557.

²⁹ T. Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*, Delhi, 1994, p. 232. This was not necessarily the case elsewhere. Shahid Amin has pointed out that *chaukidars* in the district of Gorakhpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh had a 'dignified ancestry'. While most of those appointed to the office were Ahirs, high-caste Brahmins also served as *chaukidars*. See S. Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Meaning: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Berkeley, 1995, p. 147.

³⁰ FSUP, p. 394.

³¹ MacMunn, *The Indian Mutiny*, p. 30.

in twentieth-century India. Both were unexpected and untraceable. In each instance the receiver is requested to make further copies of each item which must be sent on to other people. The recipient of a chain letter is usually warned not to break the transmission in much the same way as those who delivered the *chapatis* feared to break the chain of distribution.³² However, Guha has argued that omens and rumours attached to the *chapati* circulation had a wider and more profound impact than messages contained in chain letters. The meaning of the latter were circumscribed by their text whereas, as we shall see, the message attributed to the *chapatis* was more flexible due to the vague and imprecise nature of the transmission.³³

Speed

In early March 1857 a newspaper correspondent wrote from the city of Calcutta that the *chapati* circulation resembled a 'wave' that 'swept province after province'.³⁴ George Harvey, Commissioner of the Agra Division in 1858, claimed that the *chapatis* carried by *chaukidars* traversed up to 200 miles in a single night.³⁵ This assertion should be treated with caution. *Dak* or Indian mail runners could at best cover half this distance in a 24-hour period. Palmer estimated that the speed of the transmission of the *chapatis* equalled that of the mail, that is, the *chapati* circulation could cover 100 miles in a single day.³⁶ However, it is evident that the speed at which the *chapatis* spread through the countryside surprised the British, with one official claiming that the *chapatis* had been distributed throughout the recently annexed Kingdom of Awadh over a ten-day period.³⁷

The British believed that the speed at which the *chapatis* were dispersed was enhanced by the geometrical character of the transmission. The dispersal of *chapatis* in this manner raises a number of interesting questions. If the *chapati* circulation had adhered to a strictly geometrical progression, such a movement would have concealed any indication of a linear progression. Yet the movement of *chapatis* in such a direction was clearly discernible. In addition, the presence of a geometrical movement would lead one to expect that the *chapatis* were being circulated over most, if not all, of northern and central India, and indeed in other regions in India. No such widespread circulation was reported. It may well be that reports claiming that the *chapati* distribution was expanding at a geometrical rate simply reflected the astonishment felt by the British at the speed at which the *chapatis* were being passed between villages, a speed that seemed to exceed that at which government orders were transmitted. Thus the speed of the *chapati* movement contributed to its mystery and drew attention to the seemingly independent and uncontrollable nature of the event.

³² Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, pp. 377-78.

³³ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, pp. 245-46.

³⁴ *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7.

³⁵ FSUP, p. 392.

³⁶ J.A.B. Palmer, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut in 1857*, Cambridge, 1966, p. 2.

³⁷ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 637.

Geographical Extent

Majumdar and Rahim have asserted that the *chapatii* movement began in 1856. Majumdar claims that the *chapatii* were widely circulated throughout central India during that year and spread westward as far as Elichpur(?). He also states that the *chapatii* circulated in Hyderabad and the Bombay Presidency.³⁸ It is possible that the *chapatii* movement commenced in the latter stages of 1856; however, Majumdar provides no evidence to support his contention that the *chapatii* were widely circulated at that time.

One of the first official reports on the *chapatii* circulation was produced by Captain Keatinge stationed at Nimar in the Sagar and Nerbada Territories in central India. In a letter dated 9 February 1857, Keatinge informed his immediate superior, William Erskine, the local commissioner, that *chapatii* had been circulating among villages in the western part of the Nimar region at least since mid-January 1857.³⁹ The first official correspondence on the circulation of the *chapatii* in the NWP dates from 19 February 1857. On that day William Ford, Magistrate and Collector of Gurgaon district in Haryana, wrote to Simon Fraser, Commissioner of Delhi, that *chapatii* had begun to circulate in his district.⁴⁰

British and Indian officials, looking back on the circulation after the conclusion of the Revolt, claimed that the *chapatii* had begun circulating in the NWP prior to February 1857. Harvey, writing in 1859, stated that the circulation had first been brought to his attention by village zamindars in the district of Mainpuri at the start of 1857 (presumably January 1857). Ganga Pershad, a *taltsildar* (Indian revenue officer) from the district of Meerut, claimed in a deposition that the *chapatii* had begun circulating in his district at the end of 1856 or the beginning of 1857. This account is contradicted by Mohar Singh, the deputy collector of Meerut, who stated that the *chapatii* circulation began in the district in January or February 1857.⁴¹ Almost all contemporary accounts found in the literature on the *chapatii* state that the *chapatii* began to circulate in the NWP in February 1857. Of course, this is not to say that *chapatii* may not have been in circulation in the region in the preceding month. However, such a circulation, if it did occur, remains undocumented.

The original starting point of the circulation remains unknown. A number of possible locations were suggested by contemporary commentators. Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, the personal physician of Bahadur Shah, King of Delhi, believed that the movement first started in Awadh.⁴² Theophilus Metcalfe, Joint-

³⁸ Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, p. 375.

³⁹ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 572.

⁴⁰ FSUP, p. 390.

⁴¹ Statement of Mohar Singh and statement of Ganga Pershad, Tahsildar, Meerut District, HMS, f. 961 and f. 965.

⁴² Evidence of Hakim Ahsanullah Khan. Supplement to the Proceedings on the trial of Muhammad Bahadur Shah, Titular King of Delhi, before a charge of Rebellion, Treason and Murder, held at Delhi on 27 January 1858, and following days. *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers*, 1859 (henceforth *PP*), session 1, Vol. 18, p. 158.

Magistrate of Delhi in 1857, was even more specific: he claimed that the circulation first began in Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, a kingdom annexed by the British only one year before the outbreak of the Revolt.⁴³ It was also claimed that the movement began in Bundelkhand, at Nagar in Maharashtra, or spread outwards from the sepoys cantonment at Barrackpore in western Bengal. The *chapatii* circulation was also said to have spread from Bhopal or Scindia, or to have been started by the inhabitants of the city of Patna in the province of Bihar. Others alleged that the movement was initiated by the local population in southern Madhya Pradesh. Finally, Churni Lal, an Indian news-writer, claimed that the *chapatii* circulation had started from Panipat or Karnaul.⁴⁴

For Indians, the locations just cited were rich in political or religious symbolism. Many of these locations were either the sites of major military clashes between armies, or the locations of mythical battles described in the sacred Hindu religious texts. Panipat, located 92 kilometres north of Delhi, was the site of three historically significant battles. Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi, King of Delhi, at Panipat in 1526. This military victory paved the way for the foundation of Mughal rule in India. In 1556 Akbar defeated a Pathan army at Panipat, and in 1761 a Maratha army was defeated by an Afghan military force led by Ahmad Shah Abdali. Kamal features in events described in the *Mahabharata*. It was also the site of a battle that took place in 1739 between Nadir Shah, the leader of a Persian army, and Muhammad Shah, a Mughal emperor. Nadir Shah's defeat of Muhammad Shah's forces signalled the eclipse of Mughal military power in northern India. In addition, the Kurukshetra tank is located at a short distance to the north of Karnal. This tank is regarded as a sacred site by Hindu pilgrims. Mandeshwar was also named as the possible birthplace of the *chapatii* movement. In former times this town had achieved religious and political prominence. It is mentioned in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. During the eighteenth century, Rani Aliyabai, Holkar Queen of Indore, built an impressive fort and temple complex at Mandeshwar. An article published in the *Calcutta Review* in 1857 claimed that the *chapatii* circulation may have started from Murshidabad.⁴⁵ This town was the former capital of the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daula, whose forces were defeated by a British army led by Robert Clive at Palashi in 1757.

The spread of the *chapatii* appears to have followed a set direction. This pattern of movement had two distinctive features: it consisted of a general movement of the *chapatii* from south to north—from districts in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra to districts situated on the Gangetic plain—and a movement from east to west—up the Gangetic valley towards the Punjab. This non-geometrical progression of the

⁴³ Evidence of Theophilus Metcalfe, Proceedings on the trial of Muhammad Bahadur Shah, *PP*, p. 81.

⁴⁴ C. Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 1, London, n.d., p. 39; Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, p. 376; Mishra, *Nana Sahib*, p. 202; 'The Indian crisis of 1857', p. 410; and Evidence of Churni Lal, *PP*, p. 85.

⁴⁵ 'The Indian crisis of 1857', p. 410.

chapatis through the NWP from the south-east to the north-west can be traced by reference to the dates upon which the circulation was first reported in a district.

Erskine reported that *chapatis* had been circulating in the districts of Sagar, Dumah, Jubbulpur and Nursinghpur in central India from January 1857.⁴⁶ An article published in a local British newspaper stated that *chapatis* were in circulation in the districts of Allahabad and Kanpur in the NWP in mid-February 1857.⁴⁷ From here the *chapatis* entered Etawah, Farruckhabad and the district of Mainpuri. It was also reported that the *chapati* circulation had crossed into Awadh in late February 1857 and had spread throughout districts in the former kingdom by March 1857. From Mainpuri and other districts the *chapatis* continued on their westward march into Etah, Aligarh and districts in the Rohilkhand Division. This movement is confirmed by the report of the *tahsildar* of Meerut who stated that the *chapatis* entered his district from the south-east. According to Wallace Dunlop, Magistrate of Meerut, *chapatis* first began circulating in the district in late February or early March 1857, and Ford reported that the *chapatis* had entered his district from the neighbouring district of Mathura to the south-east.⁴⁸ From Haryana and districts in the western half of the NWP, the *chapatis* may have passed into districts in the Punjab. Frederick Roberts reported that rumours concerning the 'mysterious' *chapatis* were circulating in the city of Peshwar in the Punjab in early 1857.⁴⁹ They were also reported to be circulating at Nimach in north-western Madhya Pradesh in late February 1857. This movement may have spread westward into Rajasthan.⁵⁰

The linear movement of the *chapatis* from south to north and from east to west appears to have occurred over a four-month period from January to April 1857. Within each district the circulation appears to have lasted only a few days. Thornhill stated that circulation of *chapatis* in Muttra ceased after nine days.⁵¹ The direction in which the *chapatis* spread may well explain the absence of official reports concerning the circulation of *chapatis* in eastern Uttar Pradesh, that is, in the districts north of Mirzapur. Nor are there any official reports of *chapatis* circulating in Bihar or Bengal. Instead, it seems that the *chapatis* entered the districts of Allahabad, Banda and Kanpur from the south and advanced in a broad front westward through districts in Awadh and the NWP.

Context: Rumours and Omens in 1857

Any attempt to analyze the *chapati* circulation must take into account the conditions that existed in rural areas in northern India in the months leading up to the

⁴⁶ Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, p. 39, fn.

⁴⁷ FSUP, p. 389.

⁴⁸ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, p. 399.

⁴⁹ Field Marshal Lord Roberts, *Forty-one Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief*, London, 1898, p. 34.

⁵⁰ P.C. Gupta, *Nana Sahib and the Rising at Cawnpore*, Oxford, 1963, p. 35.

⁵¹ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 3.

outbreak of mutiny among sepoys stationed at the town of Meerut in May 1857. It is necessary to place the circulation in context rather than treat it as an isolated event divorced from other events that occurred in the region in which the *chapatis* were distributed.

During the first five months of 1857 a sense of unease and uncertainty gripped the Indian population in northern and central India. A belief that some sort of calamity loomed on the horizon was felt widely. This sense of concern was reflected in the sale of amulets in bazaars.⁵² These amulets were intended to protect the wearer from harm. Magic symbols began to appear on walls. In the major urban centres notices were pasted on the walls of public buildings urging Muslims to rise and defend their religion against the *firinghis* (foreigners). This call was echoed by *maulvis* (Muslim religious leaders) travelling in the countryside.⁵³ The sense of unease was observed by J.W. Sherer, Magistrate of Fatehpur. Among the peasantry of the district 'there was a general expectation which paralysed all activity' during which 'all were waiting—waiting—they certainly had no idea for what.'⁵⁴

Among the many rumours circulating in the early part of 1857 was a belief that the British had imported flour into India into which finely ground bone dust had been mixed. The flour had then been placed on sale in the leading bazaars of northern India. This act was construed as part of a plan devised by the British to destroy the Hindu caste system. According to Malleson, this action was instigated by Muslim conspirators. It represented the '*chapari* without its form and without its inconveniences'. Malleson believed that the *chapati* circulation was 'too tangibly open to European interference'.⁵⁵ Presumably Malleson is referring to the ability of the British to seize the *chapatis* and arrest the *chapati* messengers. Contamination of flour stocks was virtually impossible to prevent and equally difficult to detect. In Madhya Pradesh, Scot received a report from the Raja of Panna about a number of strange events that had occurred in the local area in the latter part of 1856 and the early part of 1857. Mention was made by the Raja of the circulation of *chapatis*. The Raja also reported the transmission of a verbal message between villagers to the effect that the sister would protect the brother, that is the weak would triumph over the strong.⁵⁶

I.T. Pritchard, a civil official stationed in Rajputana during the early part of 1857, remarked that the many rumours circulating at that time 'fled about like will-o'-the-wisps—it was impossible to trace their origin or lay hold of them, in

⁵² C. Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India, 1857*, reprint, Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 60.

⁵³ J. Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeah mutiny—The Punjab', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 83: 507, 1858, p. 94; *idem*, 'Crisis of the sepoy rebellion', *London Quarterly Review*, Vol. 9: 18, 1858, p. 533; P.O.J. Taylor, general ed., *A Companion to the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857*, Delhi, 1996, p. 337.

⁵⁴ J.W. Sherer, *Daily Life during the Indian Mutiny*, London, 1910, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny*, pp. 60-61; Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 5, p. 60-41.

⁵⁶ Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising*, p. 232.

any shape, or ever to get them accurately detailed.' According to Pritchard, these rumours possessed an 'undefinable character' and, as a consequence, generated a 'spirit of disquietude' among the local population.⁵⁷ These rumours, omens and prophecies were being circulated throughout towns and villages in northern and central India at precisely the same time as the *chapatis*. It could be argued, as Guha has done, that these events fused together to form 'one gigantic rumour'.⁵⁸ At the very least they provided evidence that all was not well.

British Reaction to the *Chapatis*

After recovering from the initial surprise at receiving news about this strange and astonishing event, British district officials began to investigate the matter. *Chaukidars* were intercepted, questioned and, in some cases, arrested. Reports on the circulation were forwarded to officials by local functionaries of the state—the *tahsildars* and the *thanadars*. Local zamindars also passed on information about the *chapati* movement to the local police or British officials, as did those responsible for the circulation, the village *chaukidars*. The *chapatis* were examined, handed and even tasted by district officials, and a concerted effort was made to discover their origin and the object of the circulation.

Those district officials who considered the circulation to be of some significance compiled reports on the subject which were sent to senior officials. For example, in February 1857 Ford informed Fraser that 'a signal has passed through a number of villages of this district, the purport of which has not yet transpired'.⁵⁹ Senior officials in turn compiled their own reports on the *chapatis*. Erskine sent a report on the subject to C.B. Thornhill, Officiating Secretary of the Government of the NWP. In this letter, dated 5 March 1857, Erskine provided a summary of the information he had managed to collect on the *chapati* movement.⁶⁰

Some officials endeavoured to put a stop to the circulation. Metcalfe claimed that he was able to prevent the circulation of the *chapatis* in villages in the Delhi region after the movement had spread through several villages. However, this action appears to have been successful only in villages in close proximity to the city of Delhi. *Chapatis* were widely circulated in the *thana* of Badarpur only some 16 miles outside the city. Metcalfe ordered the *thanadar* of this police circle to trace the origin of the circulation. The *thanadar*'s efforts to do so yielded little concrete result other than the fact that the circulation had entered the *thana* from the east.⁶¹

The circulation received extensive coverage in the local English-language newspapers. One newspaper made the bold claim that the *chapatis* had 'set the European

World in a fever of speculation'.⁶² The first report of the circulation in an English newspaper published in north India dates from late February 1857. On 27 February 1857 an article on the *chapatis* appeared in the *Mofussilite*. Articles relating to the *chapatis* were subsequently published in *Delhi Gazette*, *Central Star*, *Friend of India* and *Calcutta Review*. Articles on the movement began to appear in newspapers published in England in April 1857.

J.R. Colvin, Lieutenant-Governor of the NWP, responded to reports on the circulation of the *chapatis* by issuing an official circular on the subject. This circular was intended to draw the attention of district officials to the *chapati* movement. E.A. Reade, a senior official in the Government of the NWP, regarded Colvin's action as unwarranted. It represented a 'nervous reaction' which 'raised the bogey of sedition'. In Reade's view the circular had the effect of 'intensifying an atmosphere of suspicion'.⁶³ However, this assertion ignores the fact that many district officials had investigated and reported upon the matter without waiting for orders to do so. Furthermore, articles detailing the circulation soon appeared in the widely read local English newspapers. In fact, Erskine begins his official report on the *chapatis* by referring to an article on the circulation published in the *Mofussilite*.

For many members of the British community in India the 'mysterious' *chapati* circulation remained an enigma. Charlotte Canning, the wife of the Governor-General of India, made the following observation: 'there is an odd mysterious thing going on, still unexplained. It is this. In one part of the country the native police have been making little cakes—*chappaties*—and sending them on from place to place...no one can discover any meaning in it.'⁶⁴ Since the object of the circulation was far from clear, many regarded it as a harmless act 'devoid of any political meaning'.⁶⁵ The inclination to dismiss the *chapatis* as an unimportant and therefore an unimportant aberration can be seen with reference to the contents of an article published in the *Friend of India* in early March 1857. This article presents a satirical checklist of possible explanations:

What does it mean?...Are all the Chowkedars about to strike for wages? or is anybody trying a new scheme for a parcel dawk? Is it treason or jest? Is there to be an 'explosion of feeling', or only of laughter? Is the chaupatty...a cause of revolt, or only of the colic? Is the act that of some influential malcontent, or only of a fool?⁶⁶

The writer of another newspaper article doubted whether the 'local substitutes for a hot cross bun' posed any sort of threat to the state given the apparent strength

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁶³ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 322.

⁶⁴ B. Gardner, *The East India Company*, London, 1971, p. 252.

⁶⁵ Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeath mutiny', p. 94.

⁶⁶ *FSUP*, p. 389; Gupta, *Nana Sahib*, p. 36; *The Annual Register, or a View of History and Politics of the Year 1857*, London, 1858, p. 245.

⁵⁷ I.T. Pritchard, *The Mutinies in Rajpootana: Being a Personal Narrative of the Mutiny at Nusserrabad*, reprint, Ajmer, 1976, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 255.

⁵⁹ *FSUP*, p. 390.

⁶⁰ Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, p. 39, fn.

⁶¹ Evidence of Metcalfe, pp. p. 81; *FSUP*, pp. 393-94.

and stability of British rule over India in early 1857. Thus for some the *chapatis* became a 'subject of scorn and ridicule' with the circulation regarded as a hoax or 'a trifle—a joke'. Those officials keen to investigate the 'chuppatty mystery' were referred to as 'croakers' by officials residing in the city of Calcutta.⁶⁷

Reflecting on his experiences in the district of Budaun in 1857, William Edwards claimed that the 'rural population of all classes, among whom these cakes spread, were as ignorant as I was myself on the real object.'⁶⁸ Erskine asserted that the movement was harmless. Writing in the period after the suppression of the Revolt, he remarked that 'even now it is a matter of doubt if the signal was understood by any one.'⁶⁹ Sherer wrote that he was 'almost inclined to think more has been made of them than was their due'.⁷⁰ Dunlop claimed that no solid evidence existed to establish a causal connection between the circulation and the uprising of 1857. Any association between the two events was, according to him, purely 'accidental'.⁷¹

It was suggested that the circulation comprised a ritual performed by 'a secret society', a 'secret movement',⁷² or was a method used to transmit seditious letters. Indian prisoners, it was noted, often concealed messages inside *chapatis*.⁷³ Others considered the circulation to be a superstitious act initiated in the 'pursuance of a vow'.⁷⁴ A Bombay-based newspaper correspondent believed that the *chapatis* were 'directed simply to warding off diseases such as the choleraic visitation of 12 months ago...'.⁷⁵ The belief that the *chapatis* represented a device used to prevent or pass on disease was shared by senior officials such as Reade. Erskine associated the *chapati* movement with some form of religious observance. He believed that it was a propitiatory act prompted by 'a dyer's vat having gone wrong'. Apparently it was a local custom among dyers in central India to circulate *chapatis* should their dye fail to clear.⁷⁶

Some saw the *chapatis* as a signal or symbol of resistance against the state. This gave rise to a view that the *chapatis* formed part of a widespread political plot or conspiracy. Such a belief was strengthened by the outbreak of insurrection in districts through which the *chapatis* circulated soon after the cessation of the movement. After 1857 the *chapatis* were regarded as the calling cards of rebellion. This

view, according to Bayly, 'gained enormous currency'.⁷⁷ It was grounded in the ad-hoc and essentially circular argument that the *chapatis* constituted a signal or mechanism for an armed uprising against the raj; that is, the outbreak of 1857 revealed the motive behind the circulation of the *chapatis*. This led one British official to assert that 'as soon as the disturbances broke out at Meerut and Delhi, the cakes explained themselves, and the people at once perceived what was expected of them.'⁷⁸ This view was fostered and promoted in the memoirs of officials and in Victorian historical publications on the Revolt, thus making the *chapatis* the most publicized sign of the Indian Revolt.⁷⁹ An early expression of the belief that the movement possessed political connotations can be found in an article published in *The Times* in April 1857. The article suggests that the local police force (the village *chaudaiars*) possessed the resources to spread sedition: 'if they should perchance imbibe dangerous ideas, how perfect their organization.'⁸⁰ John Cave-Browne, an Anglican minister based in the Punjab in 1857, believed that the *chapatis* formed part of 'the first mutterings of the approaching storm'.⁸¹

Metcalf claimed that the circulation was politically motivated because it was confined to 'government villages' and did not extend to villages included in India's princely states. R. Montgomery Martin, the author of *The Indian Empire*, noted that this was a 'significant fact, when taken into account with what followed the circulation'. According to Metcalf, the object of the *chapatis* was 'to sound a note of alarm and preparation, giving warning to the people to stand by one another on any danger menacing them'.⁸² It was also suggested that the *chapatis* constituted an act of political mobilization. G.O. Trevelyan believed that the circulation 'notifies generally that men would be well to keep themselves prepared, for something was in the air'.⁸³ Harriet Tytler, a *memsahib* who had survived the Revolt, wrote in her memoir that officials had ignored the warning inherent in the circulation: 'not understanding this proceeding and probably thinking it had something to do with their religious rites, till after it was too late, when it was discovered to mean "Be prepared for a revolution".'⁸⁴ Henry Lawrence, Chief Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General in Awadh, believed that the circulation was an act of 'mischief'.⁸⁵ In addition, the British were aware that the *chapatis* were an important item in the diet of villagers in northern India, and hence may have been chosen by political conspirators as a symbol designed to invoke a mass response. According to one contemporary commentator, 'a more powerful means of combining all

⁷⁷ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 316.

⁷⁸ Mishra, *Nana Sahab*, p. 202.

⁷⁹ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 239.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7.

⁸¹ Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeah mutiny', p. 94.

⁸² Evidence of Metcalf, *PP*, p. 81; R. Montgomery Martin, *The History of the Indian Empire*, Vol. 3, reprint, Delhi, 1983, p. 165.

⁸³ G.O. Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, London, 1865, p. 73.

⁸⁴ A. Sattin, ed., *An Englishwoman in India: The Memoirs of Harriet Tytler*, Oxford, 1986, p. 111.

⁸⁵ Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi*, p. 2, fn 2.

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7; *FSUP*, p. 391; J. Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857: Being a Narrative of the Measures by which the Punjab was Saved and Delhi Recovered during the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 1, London, 1861, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Mishra, *Nana Sahab*, p. 202.

⁶⁹ Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 1, p. 420, fn.

⁷⁰ Sherer, *Daily Life*, p. 7.

⁷¹ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 241.

⁷² Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny*, p. 59; Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeah mutiny', p. 94.

⁷³ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 572; H. Knollys, ed., *Incidents in the Sepoy War, 1857-58, Compiled from the Private Journals of General Sir Hope Grant*, Edinburgh, 1884, p. 14.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7; *The Annual Register*, p. 245.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 5, p. 63.

classes of Mohammedans in the general cause could not have been hit upon, nor one more successfully carried into execution.⁸⁶

A link was made between the *chapati* circulation and the grievances against the British shared by the inhabitants of Awadh. This kingdom had been annexed in February 1856. Its king, Wajid Ali Shah, had been deposed by the British and sent to live in exile in Calcutta. However, many of the former members of the ruling family continued to reside in Lucknow, the former capital of the kingdom. In addition, many of the sepoy in the East India Company's Bengal Army had been recruited from villages in Awadh. There is no evidence to suggest that the *chapatis* were circulated among the sepoy regiments of the Bengal Army. However, it has been suggested that the circulation was the civilian counterpart of the distribution of lotus flowers among the sepoys.⁸⁷ These factors led some officials to believe that the *chapati* circulation was a conspiratorial device developed by embittered members of the Indian aristocracy or its supporters. For example, Charles Carneg asserted that the *chapati* movement originated in Awadh.⁸⁸ The belief in the existence of a carefully planned plot against the state by aggrieved members of the Indian elite also explains the claims that the *chapati* circulation commenced in Kanpur, the home of Nana Sahib (Dhondu Rao Punt), the adopted son of Baji Rao.⁸⁹

The anonymous author of an article published in the *Calcutta Review* in December 1857 put forward an elaborate theory to account for the *chapati* circulation:

the object was first to distribute the cakes largely—then after a month or two, to make it known, that they had been sent by Government, that they had contained foul substances, intended to pollute and spoil the caste of all who had tasted them, and by this means to rouse the whole population into violent excitement and fiercest hatred to Government. . . .⁹⁰

According to the article, the *chapatis* served as a 'counterpart' to the allegedly contaminated cartridges issued to sepoys. Thus, the cartridges served to mobilize the sepoys against the British, while the *chapatis* were used as a mechanism to mobilize the rural population against colonial rule. An article reproduced in the *Delhi Gazette* shortly before the uprising at Meerut claimed that a connection existed between recent cases of 'epidemic incendiarism' in sepoy garrison towns and the circulation of 'epidemic chuppatis' in the countryside. It asserted that the latter had been replaced by the former.⁹¹

⁸⁶ *FSUP*, p. 391.

⁸⁷ S.M. Burke and S.A.D. Qurashi, *The British Raj in India: An Historical Review*, Karachi, 1995, p. 38.

⁸⁸ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 573.

⁸⁹ See A. Ward, *Our Bones are Scattered: The Carnapore Massacres of the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, New York, 1996, p. 80; Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, pp. 645-46.

⁹⁰ 'The Indian crisis of 1857', p. 411.

⁹¹ Gupta, *Nana Sahib*, p. 44.

It was also suggested that the upheaval generated by the distribution of the *chapatis* fed into the pre-existing sense of unease. Thus the aim of the circulation was to heighten the level of 'ferment' that was already present in the early months of 1857. Roberts was of the view that the *chapatis* represented a sign of 'coming trouble' and served to prepare the population 'for some forthcoming event'.⁹² This view was shared by Edwards who stated that 'it was clear they were a secret sign to be on the alert, and the minds of the people were through them kept watchful and excited'.⁹³ Another district official observed that 'if the transmission of those cakes was only intended to create a mysterious uneasiness, that object had been gained'.⁹⁴

In a speech to members of the House of Commons, Benjamin Disraeli argued that the *chapatis* comprised some form of 'secret communication' that could well serve a political purpose and, therefore, should be closely examined:

suppose the Emperor of Russia were told— 'Sire, there is a very remarkable circumstance going on in your territory; from village to village, men are passing who leave the tail of an ermine or a pot of caviar, with a message to some one to perform the same ceremony. Strange to say, this has been going on in some ten thousand villages, and we cannot make head or tail of it'. I think the Emperor of Russia would say: 'I do not know whether you can make head or tail of it, but I am quite certain there is something wrong, and that we must take some precautions; because, where the people are not usually indiscreet and troublesome, they do not make a secret communication unless it is opposed to the government. This is a secret communication, and, therefore, a communication dangerous to the government.'⁹⁵

Colonial officials in India did in fact make strenuous efforts to uncover the character of the circulation. Witnesses providing evidence at the trial of the King of Delhi were asked questions by the court concerning the nature of the *chapati* movement (see Table 2).

A report on the events that took place in Gujarat during the period of the Revolt illustrates the lengths British officials would go to in order to construct a political conspiracy theory based on the *chapati* circulation. The circulation of *chapatis* in the NWP and the movement of a pariah dog among villages in Gujarat at the same time as the Revolt in 1857 were considered to be events that were not 'meaningless or accidental'; rather they formed 'sacramental acts'. Both circulations possessed religious and magical elements fused together to serve a political purpose. The 'plotters of rebellion in Northern India' used the *chapatis* and the dog to promulgate and spread a spirit of resistance and revolt. A comparison was also made

⁹² Roberts, *Forty-one Years in India*, p. 34.

⁹³ Mishra, *Nana Sahib*, p. 202.

⁹⁴ Sherer, *Daily Life*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Nolan, *Illustrated History of the British Empire in India*, p. 712.

Table 2
Questions Asked about the Chapati Circulation at the Trial of the King of Delhi

	Yes	No	Comments
1. What was the meaning of the <i>chapatis</i> ?	-	-	unknown
2. Origin of the <i>chapatis</i> ?	-	-	unknown
3. A Hindu or a Muslim custom?	-	x	
4. Meaning understood without explanation?	-	-	could not be determined
5. Message sent with the <i>chapatis</i> ?	-	x	
6. Circulated mainly by Hindus or Muslims?	-	-	both did so
7. Were the <i>chapatis</i> discussed in Indian newspapers?	x	-	
8. Was the circulation discussed by the sepoy's?	x	-	

Source: Proceedings of the Trial of Muhammad Bahadur Shah, Titular King of Delhi, before a charge of Rebellion, Treason and Murder, held at Delhi on 27 January 1858 and following days. *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers*, 1859, session 1, Vol. 18, pp. 74, 81, 85, 100 and 114.

between the 'Mutiny Cakes' and the use made of sugar in *thug* rituals: 'like the Thags [*thugs*], those who ate the Mutiny cakes would by partaking become of one spirit, the spirit of the indwelling Kali and, in that spirit, would be ready to support and take part in any scheme of blood which the leaders of Mutiny might devise and start.'⁹⁶

Guha has argued that the British perceptions and analysis of the *chapatis* were shaped by Euro-centric cultural and historical factors. The *chapati* movement was thus interpreted as 'a preconcerted design to destroy the Raj.'⁹⁷ A view was promoted that the *chapatis* were 'the counterpart of the fiery cross'.⁹⁸ Known in Gaelic as the *cross-tairidh* or 'cross or beam of gathering', the fiery cross was used to mobilize the rural population of Scotland:

[It] consisted of a cross or a piece of wood burnt at one end and dipped in blood at the other—symbolical of fire and sword—which was handed from clansmen to clansmen, each man immediately on receiving it running with it to his nearest neighbour, so as to spread alarm over a district in a short time.⁹⁹

This sign of war was used by villagers in Scotland in ancient times and was adopted at a later date as a device for rural mobilization by the Highland clans. Historical records refer to the use of the fiery cross in Scotland as late as the Jacobite Uprising of 1745.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ L.R. Ashburner, 'Disturbances in Gujarat, 1857-59' in *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. 1, Part 1, Bombay, 1896, pp. 433-34, footnote by J.M. Campbell.

⁹⁷ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 241.

⁹⁸ 'The Indian mutiny and land-settlement', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 84, 518, p. 708.

⁹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 4, reprint, Oxford, 1970, p. 243.

¹⁰⁰ R.W. Munro, *Kinsmen and Clansmen*, Edinburgh, 1971, p. 149.

British officials in India referred to this symbol in their descriptions of the circulation of arrows among Kol villages during the early 1830s. The term also appears in official reports on the circulation of *sal* branches among members of the Santal community during the uprising of the Santals in Bengal in 1855-56. At the time of the *chapati* circulation, Captain Ternan, a deputy commissioner in central India, stated that the *chapatis* represented a 'fiery cross' designed to unsettle the minds of the local population.¹⁰¹ Edwards also claimed that the *chapatis* were 'a kind of fiery cross' used to mobilize the rural population.¹⁰² References to this term can be found in Trevelyan's account of the uprising at Kanpur and in other eyewitness accounts of the Revolt. Historical works on 1857 published during the nineteenth century frequently refer to the fiery cross. For example, in *A History of the Indian Mutiny*, first published in 1883, Holmes wrote that the *chapatis* passed 'from village to village through the length and breadth of the North-Western Provinces like the fiery cross that summoned the clansmen of Roderick to battle'.¹⁰³ E.H. Nolan has compared the circulation of the *chapatis* to the circulation of holy turf and holy straw through the countryside in Ireland.¹⁰⁴ Like the fiery cross, these were symbols of insurrection.

Trevelyan has compared the *chapati* movement to the cake of barley bread that 'foreshadowed the destruction of the host of Midian'.¹⁰⁵ This religious analogy is derived from a passage of text found in the King James version of the Bible. Gideon, the leader of the Manasseh tribe of Israelites, was instructed by an angel of God to attack and destroy the camp of the Midianites. Before doing so he secretly entered the camp and overheard one Midianite inform another about a vision revealed in a dream: 'Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo a cake of barley bread tumbled unto the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell....' To which the other Midianite replied: 'This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hands hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.' Gideon interpreted the contents of the dream as a sign that he would triumph over the Midianites and ordered his followers to attack the camp.¹⁰⁶

Cave-Browne in his analysis of the *chapati* circulation compared the movement to a legendary event drawn from Chinese history relating to the Festival of the Loaves of the Moon (*yueh-ping*). This ancient superstitious rite is held on the fifteenth day of the eighth cycle of the moon. During the festival Chinese exchange cakes. The festival developed a political hue in the fourteenth century. According to legend, Chinese opposed to Mongol rule made use of the festival to organize and launch an armed struggle that culminated in the overthrow of Mongol

¹⁰¹ Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. 5, p. 63.

¹⁰² Mishra, *Nana Sahab*, p. 202.

¹⁰³ Holmes, *A History of the Indian Mutiny*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁴ Nolan, *Illustrated History of the British Empire in India*, p. 712.

¹⁰⁵ Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁶ *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments (Authorized King James Version)*, Glasgow, 1959, Judges 7:13 and 7:14.

rule and the inauguration of the Ming dynasty. Cave-Browne argues that the *chapati* circulation had an identical goal, namely, it represented a 'hope and attempt to annihilate the English race in India, and restore to the effete house of Timur the sovereignty of Hindosthan'. Thus for Cave-Browne the *chapati* was 'an Eastern symbol of portentous import'.¹⁰⁷ The folk legend associated with the Moon cakes supports Guha's argument that the meaning of a 'visual sign' could change over time.¹⁰⁸ Joseph Gabet and Abbe Huc, the authors of a publication used as a reference source by Cave-Browne, make the transformation of the Moon cake from a religious to a political symbol explicit in their description of the festival:

A vast conspiracy was formed throughout all the provinces, which was simultaneously to develop itself on the 15th day of the eighth moon, by the massacre of Mongol soldiers, who were billeted upon each Chinese family. . . . The signal was given by a letter concealed in the cakes. . . . The massacre was effected, and the Tartar army dispersed in the houses of the Chinese, utterly annihilated. This catastrophe put an end to the Mongol domination; and ever since, the Chinese, in celebrating the festival of Yue-ping, have been less intent upon the superstitious worship of the moon, than upon the tragic event to which they owed the recovery of their national independence.¹⁰⁹

The Indian Reaction

Many Indians, including many *chaukidars*, did not know what the *chapatis* signified. As a result the *chapatis* 'travelled from place to place; no one refusing, no one doubting, few even questioning, in blind obedience, to a necessity felt rather than understood'.¹¹⁰ Erskine doubted that the population in central India knew the meaning behind the *chapatis*. However, in the aftermath of the Indian Revolt the local inhabitants came to regard the *chapatis* as a signal for revolt against the raj.¹¹¹

The *chapati* movement caused as much surprise and bewilderment among members of the Indian elite as it did among members of the British community. The personal physician to the King of Delhi stated that members of the royal court were puzzled by the movement: 'all the people in the place wondered what it could mean'. He believed that it 'implied something' and probably started among sepoy stationed in Awadh.¹¹² At the time the circulation reportedly had an adverse impact on trade. It was reported that the financial transactions conducted in the

town of Sagar in Madhya Pradesh were disrupted by the distribution of *chapatis* through that region.¹¹³

The circulation was also believed to be 'an express command of the Sikar [state] to be obeyed unquestioningly'.¹¹⁴ Dunlop reported that villagers in the Meerut district believed that the British had ordered *chapatis* to be circulated.¹¹⁵ Such an assumption is not as far-fetched as it seems. It appears to have been based on a belief that the *chaukidars*, acting in their role as local representatives of the state, had been requested by the British to pass on the *chapatis*. In 1856 *tharadars* had been ordered to dispense cholera pills to the *chaukidars* who were in turn ordered to distribute these pills to villagers.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the transmission of any item by the *chaukidars* could have been interpreted as having been instigated at the behest of the state.

The belief that the *chapatis* were sanctioned by the state was associated with a widespread belief that the circulation represented an attack on Indian religion and the Hindu caste system. One official was informed by villagers in central India that the British sought to force or bribe village headmen to consume the *chapatis* in order to destroy their caste.¹¹⁷ The threat of contamination was connected with a belief that the circulation was aimed at forcing Indians to eat the same food as Christians, a fear voiced by sepoys undertaking musket training at Ambala. The sepoys informed the instructor of the course that the *chapatis* had been distributed by servants of the government (the *chaukidars*) as a means of compelling people to eat the same food. The sepoys further believed that the *chapatis* represented a religious token designed to show that Indians would be forced to become Christians. The two beliefs were summarized by the sepoys in the phrase 'one food and one faith'.¹¹⁸ Thus, the sepoys appeared to have been convinced that the *chapati* circulation was an attempt to introduce a state-imposed diet and hence a state-imposed religion.

A corollary to this belief was the claim that the *chapati*, as a symbol of food or subsistence, was used by the British to demonstrate how this means of subsistence could be taken away. It was also seen as a means of warning the population of British plans to impose Christianity in India by contaminating staple food products. Some claimed that the *chapatis* constituted a warning of an attack upon religion. John Lawrence, Chief Commissioner of the Punjab in 1857, was told that the *chapatis* were a sign 'to hold together or lose all'.¹¹⁹ Hakim Ahsanullah Khan reported that some Indians believed it to be 'an invention of some adept in secret arts, in order to preserve unpolluted the religion of the country which it was reported

¹¹³ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, pp. 572-73, fn.

¹¹⁴ *The Times*, 28 April 1857, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, p. 398.

¹¹⁶ Palmer, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Roy, *Politics of a Popular Uprising*, p. 232.

¹¹⁸ Evidence of Captain Martineau, PP, p. 100.

¹¹⁹ Collier, *The Sound of Fury*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeath mutiny', p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 244.

¹⁰⁹ P. Pelliot, ed., *Huc and Gabet's Travels in Tartary Thibet and China, 1844-1846*, Vol. 1, London, 1928, pp. 68-69.

¹¹⁰ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 571.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 572-73, fn.

¹¹² Evidence of Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, PP, p. 158.

the British Government intended to subvert in two years'.¹²⁰ As we have seen, there were already numerous rumours in circulation throughout northern India in early 1857 which gave expression to this same fear. In some cases a fusion occurred. For example, it was alleged that ground bone dust had been inserted into the *chapatis*. It was also claimed that the *chapati* circulation was instigated by travelling *fakirs* as a means of proclaiming the impending collapse of British rule.¹²¹

Edwards noted that the local inhabitants of Budaun perceived the *chapatis* to be a 'secret sign to be on the alert'.¹²² It was claimed that the circulation represented a general warning to Indians to prepare for the signal '*Sitara Gir Parega!*' ('A star shall fall!').¹²³ Jat Mal, an Indian news-writer, stated that the circulation was a prophylactic observance to avert some impending calamity.¹²⁴ The educated Indian elite believed that the movement was politically motivated. According to Chunn Lal, former editor of *Delhi News*, an Indian-language newspaper, accounts of the circulation published in Indian newspapers at the time tended to regard the *chapati* as a signal of some unspecified future upheaval. It was also asserted that the movement was an 'invitation to the whole population of the country to unite for some object afterwards to be disclosed'.¹²⁵ Another Indian official claimed that it was intended to measure the speed by which 'sedition' could be transmitted throughout India.¹²⁶ The *thamadar* of Paharganj, Mainodin Hasan Khan, thought it probable that the distribution of the bread was 'significant of some great disturbance, which would follow immediately'.¹²⁷

The view that the *chapati* circulation was a treasonous act was widely shared and assiduously promoted by local Indian officials. Either the Indian police and revenue officials were telling the British what they believed they wanted to hear or, like their urban-based colonial officers, they themselves lacked adequate knowledge of traditional rural-based transmission mechanisms. The local functionaries of the colonial state interpreted the movement according to their own cultural values and experience. Thus the circulation was also subject to 'miscognition' by members of the Indian elite. Consequently they, like the British, regarded the circulation as a threat to state authority in the rural hinterland.

The *chapatis* also appear to have been regarded as being associated with some sort of customary vow or oath. One district official reported seeing an individual carry a *chapati* into a village whereupon the '*chapati* messenger' broke up the *chapati* into pieces and distributed these pieces among the male inhabitants of the village, reserving the largest piece for the village zamindar. Asked by the official what this practice signified, the village zamindar replied:

¹²⁰ Evidence of Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, *PP*, p. 158.

¹²¹ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 572; Collier, *The Sound of Fury*, pp. 22-23.

¹²² Mishra, *Nana Saheb*, p. 202.

¹²³ Taylor, *A Companion to the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857*, p. 81.

¹²⁴ Evidence of Jat Mal, *PP*, p. 74.

¹²⁵ Evidence of Chunn Lal, *PP*, p. 85.

¹²⁶ Gupta, *Nana Sahib*, p. 37.

¹²⁷ *FSUP*, pp. 393-94.

An old custom existed in Hindosthan, that when their *malik* [*malik* or chief] required any service of them, he adopted this mode to prepare the country for receiving his orders, and every one who partook of the chupatte was held pledged to obey the order whenever it might come, or whatever it may be. What the nature of the order in the present case would be, the zamindar said, with a suspicious smile, was not yet known to them.¹²⁸

The circulation was also claimed to have been started in Kanpur by Dessa Bawa, the guru of Nana Sahib. It was said that Bawa created an idol out of flour and lotus seeds (*rumud*). This idol was then broken up and its contents converted into small pills which were inserted into the *chapatis*. The *chapatis* were delivered to the *chaukidars* in Bithur who were in turn ordered to circulate them among the villages. It was claimed that the furthest extent to which they were circulated in northern India would denote the extent of Nana Sahib's rule. Apparently, those receiving the *chapatis* would combine to throw off British rule.¹²⁹ William Howard Russell, special correspondent for *The Times*, noted a similar story relating to Raja Beni Madho Singh of Skakarpur in Awadh. In this version of the story, a *pundit* had informed the Raja that the person whose name was associated with the *chapati* movement would rule India.¹³⁰

The *chapati* circulation was also considered by Indians to be a preventive measure against disease or a means of transmitting sickness. It was a common superstitious practice in India to use talismans or charms (*chaitawars*) in order to prevent or pass on epidemic diseases. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a prominent nineteenth-century Indian official stationed in the Bijnor district during the Revolt, believed that the *chapatis* may have been designed to offer protection against the effects of cholera that was reportedly still lingering in certain regions in the NWP in early 1857.¹³¹ Erskine was informed by members of the local population in central India that the *chapatis* could be a superstitious device used to prevent hail from falling or a device used to ward off disease.¹³² And in the Delhi region the local population initially believed that the circulation was connected to sickness prevalent at that time.¹³³

Rural-Based Transmissions in Nineteenth-Century India

The circulation of the *chapatis* was compared at the time to what were believed to be similar circulations which had taken place in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. The movement of the *chapatis* was compared to the circulation of coconuts

¹²⁸ Cave-Browne, 'The Poorbeah mutiny', p. 94.

¹²⁹ Ward, *Our Bones are Scattered*, p. 80.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* See also Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, p. 637; and Mishra, *Nana Saheb*, p. 202.

¹³¹ H. Malik, ed., *Political Profile of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Documentary Record*, Delhi, 1973, p. 135.

¹³² Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, p. 39, fn.

¹³³ Evidence of Metcalfe, *PP*, p. 81.

in central India that occurred over a one-month period in 1818. An account of this circulation can be found in John Malcolm's *A Memoir of Central India*. An extract from this book detailing the circulation was reprinted in the *Delhi Gazette* in early 1857, and a paraphrased version of the same passage later appeared in a letter to the editor of *The Times* published in the newspaper on 28 April 1857. In addition, the same extract was reprinted in an article on the Indian Revolt published in the *Calcutta Review* and was referred to in a series of articles on the Revolt in the Punjab written by Cave-Browne and published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1858.

The coconut circulation took place in May 1818 shortly after the conclusion of the Pindari military campaign. According to Malcolm, the then acting British agent for the Central India Agency, the region was at this time in 'a state of tolerable tranquillity'. However, a 'sudden agitation' arose from the passage of coconuts between villages. In some instances copper coins were circulated with the coconuts. The coconuts were delivered from one village to the next by *potails* or village headmen. In this manner the circulation spread as far as Jaipur in Rajasthan to the north and as far as the Deccan region in the south. Reports were also received of coconuts circulating in Gujarat to the west and in Bhopal to the east. The rapid passage of the coconuts appears to have been motivated by the same fear that was felt by the *chaukidars* in 1857. The *potails* delivered their coconuts in 'breathless haste' in order 'to avert a curse which was denounced on all who impeded or stopped them even for a moment'.¹³⁴

The British attempted to uncover the 'hidden meaning' of the movement. Despite their efforts, it remained 'a complete mystery'. However, its consequences were a source of concern to officials. The circulation, according to Malcolm, created 'a very serious sensation over all central India'. The mysterious nature of the transmission, as well as its speed and geographical coverage, prompted the British to put forward a number of theories that might explain this circulation. It was suggested that the coconuts may have been used to proclaim or signify the establishment of British rule over central India. Other officials considered it to be a signal for a general uprising in support of Peshwah Baja Rao II who had not at the time made peace with the British. Local Indian agents sent by the British to trace the circulation back to its point of origin attributed the movement to the actions taken by a Brahmin in Jaipur. It was alleged that the Brahmin had circulated coconuts in the local area to celebrate the birth of a son.¹³⁵ This circulation 'gained a portentous character as it became remote from the simple cause in which it commenced'.

For Malcolm the circulation of the coconuts served to highlight the extent to which the rural population in India was guided by superstition. It also illustrated

how educated Indians could manipulate villagers to serve their own ends. Furthermore, Malcolm believed that the circulation served as an example of how villagers could acquire a 'sudden impulse to action'. These comments provide support to Partha Chatterjee's assertion that colonial officials regarded Indian peasantry as being 'volatile in temperament, superstitious and often fanatical, easily aroused by agitators and troublemakers from among the Indian elite who wanted to use them for their narrow political designs'.¹³⁶ Malcolm sought to dampen the 'agitation' generated by the coconut circulation by using a Hindu superstitious custom to counteract the impact of the movement. Ironically, he used this custom to achieve a political objective. When some twenty *potails* appeared at the site of a cantonment being built by Malcolm near the city of Indore, he ordered the *potails* to break up and distribute the coconuts as a means of celebrating the laying of the foundation stone for the new building. Malcolm was aware that it was a widespread custom amongst Indians to distribute coconuts before the construction of a building or village. This formed part of the consecration ceremony associated with the creation of a local deity. After the coconuts had been distributed, Malcolm informed the assembled *potails* that the circulation of the coconuts signified the commencement of British rule over the region.

In a report on the *chapati* movement written by the *thanadar* of Paharganj, reference was made to an event drawn from local folklore. It was said that during the eclipse of Maratha rule over northern India a sprig of millet and a piece of bread had been passed from village to village in the Delhi region.¹³⁷ It has been suggested that this circulation could have taken place shortly before or during the military campaigns of the Marathas under Yashwantrao Holkar between 1803 and 1805. One historian has claimed that the circulation preceded the military campaign of 1804 which culminated in the defeat of Holkar's army by a British force at Farruckhabad.¹³⁸ Khaldun believes that the circulation may have occurred before the Marathas launched their military campaign in northern India in 1803.¹³⁹

A number of historians have referred to the circulation of *chapatis* before the outbreak of mutiny among sepoys stationed at Vellore in southern India in July 1806. Mention of this circulation can be found in publications by Sen, Gupta and Edwards. References to this event, however, are vague and contradictory. According to Thornhill, the *chapatis* were circulated in the Madras region during the late eighteenth century, that is, at least six years before the mutiny at Vellore.¹⁴⁰ If this is correct, it makes the link between the *chapati* circulation and the mutiny somewhat tenuous. This time lag did not apply to the more well-documented *chapati* circulation in 1857. Official records and recent published works on the Vellore

¹³⁶ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, pp. 158-59.

¹³⁷ FSUP, p. 394.

¹³⁸ Palmer, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut*, p. 3.

¹³⁹ Khaldun, 'The great rebellion', p. 25.

¹⁴⁰ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 3.

¹³⁴ The source material for this paragraph and the following two paragraphs is drawn from J. Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India Including Malwa and Adjoining Provinces*, 3rd edition, Vol. 2, London, 1832, pp. 217-19.

¹³⁵ It was a common practice among Brahmins in Gujarat to distribute coconuts as 'sacred food' to friends and relations. See R.E. Enthoven, *The Folklore of Bombay*, Oxford, 1924, p. 179.

mutiny contain no reference to the *chapati* circulation preceding the uprising. These same sources carefully document the actions of Muslim mendicants and the contents of rumours that swept the countryside in southern India in the period preceding the mutiny.¹⁴¹ In addition, *chapatis* were more commonly consumed in northern and central India. The closest equivalent to *chapatis* in southern India were leavened cakes made out of rice called *appams* or 'hoppers'.

In the absence of any documentary proof, the claim of Indian historians like Majumdar and Khaldun that sugar was circulated prior to the sepoymutiny at Vellore can also be discounted. An early reference to this circulation can be found in a monograph by William Butler, an American Methodist missionary. According to Butler, the sugar circulation acted as a 'signal' for the sepoys to rise up in revolt.¹⁴² Mishra asserts that sugar was circulated in 1806. However, this circulation took place in central India.¹⁴³ Finally, Majumdar's assertion that *chapatis* were circulating prior to the Maratha invasion of northern India appears to have been based on the report of a circulation of millet and bread referred to above.¹⁴⁴ However, the original account of this circulation does not specifically refer to the circulation of *chapatis*.

We are on firmer factual ground with respect to reports of the circulation of items during two major peasant uprisings that occurred before the Indian Revolt of 1857: the uprising of the Kols in Chota Nagpur in 1831-32, and the uprising of the Santals in Bengal in 1855-56. Members of the Kol tribe circulated arrows among their villages. These 'war arrows' represented a call to arms. Branches of mango trees were also circulated among members of the Kol community. These branches were traditionally used to inform members of the community to gather together for some form of joint action. The Santals circulated the branches of the *sal* or *saora* jack trees as a messenger bough (*dheroa*) signalling collective action. *Tel* (oil) and *sindur* (vermillion powder) were also circulated among Santal villages. According to Guha, these items constituted symbols for communal action or religious gatherings that acquired a political meaning in 1855. During that year they were used to notify and prepare the community for an armed struggle against the British.¹⁴⁵

Even before the final flickers of armed resistance associated with the Revolt had been extinguished, mysterious items were reported to be circulating in various parts of India. In September 1858 small balls of *atta* filled with *thuli* and *gur* were

being circulated in the Berar Province. The British suspected that this circulation had originated in Bombay. One officer suggested that the balls of *atta* had been circulated by political agents working for Nana Sahib.¹⁴⁶ In October 1858, a flag of red ochre, a coconut, a betel nut and a green betel leaf were being passed from village to village in the district of Chindwara close to the border of Maharashtra in southern Madhya Pradesh.¹⁴⁷ Sen claims that this circulation involved two flags. He also states that the colour of these flags matched that of the banner of Shivaji.¹⁴⁸ The latter was a prominent seventeenth-century Maratha ruler and military leader. An article published in the *Friend of India* on 19 June 1862 reported the circulation of *chapatis* between villages in a number of districts. In September of that same year the newspaper reported the circulation of children's clothing and dolls clothes in rural areas in southern India.¹⁴⁹ Because these circulations occurred shortly after the suppression of the Revolt, the British tended to regard them as being politically inspired.

From the examples cited above, it is evident that the circulation of animals or items through the countryside before and after 1857 was looked upon by the British with suspicion. These actions were considered to be alien and 'mysterious' because, according to Arnold, they formed mechanisms for rural communication and solidarity that remained essentially outside the knowledge of the state and, therefore, the control of the state: 'For the British, whose own lines of rural communication in India were often singularly deficient and who saw a potential danger to their own power networks of local solidarity, these were aspects of indigenous society to be viewed with apprehension, even alarm.'¹⁵⁰ This reaction was evident in the British response to the circulation of coconuts in central India in 1818. To one commentator writing about this event in 1857, this circulation (and by implication the circulation of the *chapatis*) revealed the rapid speed by which discontent could spread in the Indian countryside. It also illustrated 'the extraordinary system of network which unites every town, village and hamlet throughout Hindustan'.¹⁵¹ And an article published in the *Friend of India* in March 1857 expressed concern that the police (the *chaukidars*) were involved in a transmission 'not authorized by a European'.¹⁵²

Chapatis: A Cholera Disease Transmitter?

It has been suggested that the *chapati* movement may have served as a superstitious device designed to prevent or pass on diseases such as smallpox or cholera. Keatinge reported that *chapatis* had reached Nimar from the city of Indore to the

¹⁴⁶ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, p. 400.

¹⁴⁷ Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, p. 377.

¹⁴⁸ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, p. 400.

¹⁴⁹ Gupta, *Nana Sahib*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵⁰ Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, p. 178.

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 28 April 1857, p. 4.

¹⁵² *The Annual Register*, p. 245.

¹⁴¹ On the Vellore mutiny see C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 179; R.E. Frykenberg, 'New light on the Vellore mutiny', in K. Ballhatchet and J. Harrison, eds, *East India Company Studies: Papers Presented to Professor Sir Cyril Phillips*, Hong Kong, 1986, pp. 209, 213; A.F. Cox, *North Arcot*, revised edition by H.A. Stuart, Vol. 1, Madras, 1895, p. 106. For primary source material on rumours associated with the mutiny see *HMS*, Vol. 510, reel 206.

¹⁴² W. Butler, *The Land of the Veda*, 3rd edition, New York, 1872, p. 226.

¹⁴³ Mishra, *Nana Sahib*, p. 202.

¹⁴⁴ Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny*, p. 377.

¹⁴⁵ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, pp. 235-38.

mouth in January 1857. At the time the city was in the grip of a cholera outbreak which had killed many of its residents. According to Keatinge, the inhabitants of the city had distributed the *chapatis* after the performance of a 'religious ritual'. He also pointed out that it was a common custom among villagers in Nimar to use scapegoats to transmit disease.¹⁵³ The belief that *chapatis* acted as 'carriers of pestilence' was shared by W.H. Carey and Sherer. The latter asserted that the circulation of the *chapatis* constituted a superstitious practice used to transfer epidemic diseases.¹⁵⁴ Another official wrote that 'its real origin was doubtless a superstitious attempt to prevent any return of the fearful visitation of epidemic cholera which had devastated the North-West Provinces the year before.'¹⁵⁵

The magical devices used in disease transmission ceremonies tended to be ordinary items that could be collected quickly. These could include utensils, food items such as rice, coconuts and bread, and livestock. The Indians had a specific expression for this practice—*chalawa*—which, loosely translated, means 'passing on a malady'.¹⁵⁶ Efforts made to expel disease could involve the sacrifice of goats or buffaloes. It was also common for villagers to pass on buffaloes, chickens or goats from village to village. A person could, on occasion, take the place of an animal as a disease scapegoat. In some cases villagers drove out a low-caste Chamār or a prostitute from the village. In central India the Pattia Bhils developed an elaborate disease prevention ritual. Food, thread, tinsel and the head of a cock were placed in a jar. Wine was poured over the jar, and it was placed on a wooden cart and passed from one village on to the next. The Dhodias in Gujarat transported the image of *Samradeo* (a local disease deity) in a cart, along with various offerings such as vermilion and coins.¹⁵⁷ Often such carts could be transported as far as 50 miles from their original starting points.¹⁵⁸

According to Arnold, cholera in nineteenth-century India was a 'highly political disease' in that it appeared to pose a threat to the most vital component of state power in India: the military might of the British. Cholera decimated the British armies in the early part of the century and continued to inflict a heavy toll up to 1857. Indeed, cholera, along with other medical conditions, accounted for the bulk of the casualties sustained by British military forces during the Revolt.¹⁵⁹ The British tended to view cholera disease transmitters as devices that could be used to spread political discontent. District officials sought to discover whether or not such transmissions constituted a political conspiracy directed against the government. In other words, by misinterpreting the response of Indians to cholera

outbreaks, British officials developed a political response to what were essentially rural-based disease prevention mechanisms.

After the Revolt officials carefully documented and investigated any mysterious transmission of objects in the countryside. In April 1860, a *ghura* or earthenware pot was circulated among villagers in the Agra region of the NWP. The movement of the pot was traced back through some ninety different villages before the trail ran cold on the borders of modern-day Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The pot contained a number of coins, cowrie shells, rings and tobacco. It was apparently passed on quickly from village to village by Chamār women with local zamindars making contributions to the pot's contents out of fear of the 'misfortune' that might afflict those not doing so. This same compulsion acted as the driving force behind the circulation of coconuts in central India in 1818 and the passage of the *chapatis* in 1857. The British initially thought the circulation of the pot contained a 'serious message'. However, upon closer investigation, it was discovered that the pot was a common method used by villagers to prevent the spread of cholera. British suspicions about the purpose of this particular disease transmitter were perhaps a reflection of the fact that the circulation of the buffaloes took place only two years after the suppression of the Revolt. Senior officials informed district officers that such transmissions should be 'narrowly watched and duly reported'.¹⁶⁰

Cholera was viewed by Indians with a mixture of 'mystery and dread',¹⁶¹ feelings fostered by the sudden appearance of the disease, its rapid spread, its equally rapid demise, and its tendency to strike in what seemed to be a localized and indiscriminate manner. The appearance of the disease was seen as the result of the displeasure of the disease deities. The anger of the gods was usually attributed to a failure to attend to religious duties in a correct or appropriate manner. For Indians cholera was a 'tangible manifestation of some wider disorder',¹⁶² to be viewed with concern and trepidation.

Indians also made a connection between the outbreak of cholera and colonial conquest and rule. In Indian folklore the incidence and spread of cholera were at times attributed to the actions of British troops. According to one popular tradition, King Vikram defeated cholera and buried the disease in the ground. However, British soldiers dug up the site where the cholera was buried, believing that the site contained hidden treasure. As a result, cholera was released once again and proceeded to wreak havoc in the countryside. Among its first victims were the would-be plunderers. A folk story from the Bijapur region in north India claims that one of the Adil Shah kings managed to successfully confine the cholera disease spirit to a house. Cholera was again released when British troops entered the house in search of treasure.¹⁶³ A link between cholera and the advent of British rule can

¹⁵³ Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War*, pp. 572-73, fn.

¹⁵⁴ Sherer, *Daily Life*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁵ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven*, p. 399.

¹⁵⁶ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 243.

¹⁵⁷ W. Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, New Delhi, 1925, p. 127.

¹⁵⁸ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. 9, Part 1, Bombay, 1901, p. 415.

¹⁵⁹ British military forces involved in the suppression of the Revolt suffered 9,467 fatalities. Of these only 586 were the result of injuries sustained in military engagements. Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

¹⁶¹ H. W. Bellew, *The History of Cholera in India from 1862 to 1881*, London, 1885, p. 802.

¹⁶² Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, p. 171.

¹⁶³ Enthoven, *The Folklore of Bombay*, p. 258.

also be seen in a folk story from Bundelkhand in central India. During the Pindari War of 1816–17 a contingent of the British army under the overall command of Lord Hastings camped near a grove that contained the remains of Hardoul Lal, the son of Bir Singh Reo, a local raja. Despite protests made by a local Hindu priest, cattle were slaughtered in the grove to feed the soldiers. Immediately following this action, cholera broke out among the troops. It later spread to other parts of India, so it was claimed, under the direction of the spirit of Lal. Temples were built to worship Lal as 'the supposed great originator of the cholera morbus'.¹⁶⁴

Cholera disease transmitters in India have been extensively documented. In southern India villagers passed pots filled with rice and soaked with the blood and entrails of buffaloes from village to village. In Gujarat the rural population drove out a goat or a 'gaudily decked' buffalo from a village. These animals were typically marked with the symbol of the trident in red pigment. In the Konkan region of Karnataka a *parad*, or basket, was passed between villagers along with a goat or a chicken. The basket contained rice, coconuts, limes, betelnuts, liquor, red flowers, black gram and other items. During the cholera epidemics in the Vizagapatnam region of southern India, villagers constructed small-scale carts upon which were placed various religious offerings which were then sent on from village to village.¹⁶⁵

References exist in the literature to the use of *chapatis* as disease transmitters prior to 1857. However, there is no single extensively documented case of *chapati* distribution on the scale seen in 1857. Lloyd, Deputy Commissioner of Nimach in central India, noted in an article published in the *Delhi Gazette* on 24 March 1857 that *chapatis* had circulated among villages in the region. Such a circulation had occurred as recently as 1854. During that year *chapatis* had been fed to village dogs during a local outbreak of cholera. Lloyd attributed these circulations to 'a superstitious idea of allaying or preventing the ravages of diseases such as cholera, by a general distribution of cakes'.¹⁶⁶

Contemporary accounts that refer to the timing of the cholera outbreak in northern India prior to the Revolt tend to contradict one another. It is claimed that the *chapati* circulation was a preventative measure designed to forestall the return of a cholera epidemic on the scale of that seen in 1856. Other accounts claim that the circulation was a direct response to the presence of cholera in certain districts in northern and central India in 1857. These contradictory assertions have found their way into the historical literature on the subject. For example, Arnold is of the view that 'the chapatis were intended to pass on the cholera and so confer protection from the epidemic then raging',¹⁶⁷ that is, the *chapati* circulation was prompted

¹⁶⁴ W.H. Sleeman, *Rumbles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (V.A. Smith, ed.), reprint, Karachi, 1973, pp. 163–64 and p. 232; and David Arnold, 'Cholera and colonialism in British India', *Past and Present*, No. 118, 1986, pp. 127–28.

¹⁶⁵ S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 37–38; Enthoven, *The Folklore of Bombay*, pp. 257, 266; and E. Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions in Southern India*, London, 1912, p. 175.

¹⁶⁶ Gupta, *Nama Sahib*, p. 36–37.

¹⁶⁷ Arnold, 'Cholera and colonialism', p. 133.

by the presence of a cholera epidemic in the region in early 1857. On the other hand, Moon has suggested that the 'most probable explanation' for the circulation is the theory advanced by Dunlop who asserted that the *chapati* acted as a superstitious device to prevent a cholera outbreak of the magnitude of that which had occurred in 1856, and which 'still lingered in scattered spots'.¹⁶⁸

Most accounts that refer to the disease claim that the *chapatis* were a superstitious reaction to the cholera epidemic which had broken out in the autumn months of 1856, rather than a reaction to the continued presence of the disease in 1857. In fact, the literature contains a reference to a symbol or legend associated with the cholera epidemic of 1856. During that year the British received reports concerning a 'mysterious horseman' who, according to one account, 'spread contemporaneously with the epidemic which it was supposed to explain'. It was said that the horseman rode through the countryside at night and told those he encountered that 'pestilence was in his train'.¹⁶⁹

The cholera epidemic of 1856 first broke out in March, and appears to have reached its maximum intensity in July or August before petering out in the early part of October. It appears that, in the western half of the NWP at least, the disease remained essentially dormant during the period between November 1856 and March 1857, before once again making its presence felt in April 1857.¹⁷⁰ However, official statistics on cholera outbreak in the period up to the mid-nineteenth century are imperfect. Data used to analyze the intensity and spread of cholera over different districts was restricted to cases of cholera reported among prisoners in district jails or the incidence of cholera among detachments of European and Indian troops. The statistics reproduced in official reports on the disease were also distorted by the failure of medical officers to correctly diagnose cholera cases and by the tendency to lump cholera cases under other disease headings in their medical returns.¹⁷¹ Moreover, the incidence of cholera in rural areas cannot be determined with any degree of accuracy. Villagers, out of fear or dislike of state-sponsored disease prevention measures, concealed the disease by, for example, reporting it to local officials under a different name. Local landholders were also suspicious of the intentions of the state. For example, in Bengal in the early 1830s *tikadars* (local revenue farmers or contractors) were directed by the British to provide villagers with smallpox inoculations. The inoculation programme was opposed by the *tikadars*, perhaps out of a belief that it infringed upon their local privileges or imposed an additional administrative burden upon them. The *tikadars* reportedly informed the villagers that 'it was the design of the English, by such a practice, to exterminate the Natives of this Country'.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, p. 685.

¹⁶⁹ FSUP, p. 391; *The Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ J.L. Bryden, *Epidemic Cholera in the Bengal Presidency: A Report on the Cholera of 1866–68 and its Relations to Cholera of Previous Epidemics*, Calcutta, 1869, pp. 18–20.

¹⁷¹ *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, 1983, p. 479.

¹⁷² S.A.C. Das Gupta, ed., *The Days of John Company: Selections from Calcutta Gazette, 1824–1832*, Calcutta, 1959, p. 687.

The argument that the *chapatis* served as a propitiatory device to transmit disease has been challenged by Palmer. He has raised the obvious question of timing: why are there no official reports on the circulation of *chapatis* during the widespread and virulent cholera outbreak in 1856? Palmer points out that official documents contain a limited number of references to the use of buffaloes as disease scapegoats in 1856. In one instance, the passage of a buffalo caused an 'affray' between villages. If the *chapatis* acted as disease transmitters this should, Palmer argues, have been reflected in a rise in the level of reported cases of inter-village disputes and conflict.¹⁷³ However, disease transmitters were usually quickly passed on from one village to another without recourse to violence. And it is perhaps not a coincidence that the course and geographical coverage of the cholera epidemic of 1856 and the *chapati* circulation of 1857 closely mirrored one another.

Conclusion

It is clear that the circulation of the *chapatis* generated excitement and alarm among the rural inhabitants of central and northern India. The movement itself remains a perplexing and allusive rural phenomenon, although it seems likely that it constituted some form of disease transmission. Its association with the Revolt lies in the belief, widely held at the time of the circulation, that the *chapatis* formed some sort of signal for future collective action. This signal was itself prone to multiple interpretations. As one contemporary Indian observer remarked, the *chapatis* 'had different meanings for different people'.¹⁷⁴ The response of the British to the circulation serves to highlight their ignorance of the character and purpose of traditional rural-based networks of communication. In addition, the *chapati* movement was often perceived in markedly different manners by illiterate villagers and by Indian officials and other members of the Indian elite. Like the British, the latter tended to regard the circulation as posing some sort of threat to government authority. Thus, the cause of the circulation is perhaps less important than the significance attached to the event by the British and sections of the Indian population.

The timing of the *chapati* movement further heightened the sense of unease that already existed among the rural population and the soldiers in the sepoy regiments during the early months of 1857. The *chapatis* became part of the 'devil's wind' and 'helped darken the minds of men by the premonition of some impending disaster'.¹⁷⁵ After 1857, district officials remained on the alert for similar transmissions. Those that did occur were investigated to determine whether or not they posed a danger to the state. The belief that the *chapatis* were transmitters of political

¹⁷³ Palmer, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut*, p. 2.
¹⁷⁴ Evidence of Jat Mal, PP, p. 74.

¹⁷⁵ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 246.

sedition acquired deep roots in the colonial consciousness. One official, writing in the 1890s, sought to explain the unwelcome advent of the 'paid political propagandist' in the Bombay Province by reference to the perceived political character of the *chapatis*. He asserted that 'since the Mutinies, by the magic of letters, Kali has passed from the wafer [the *chapati*] into the leaflet.'¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, 1896, pp. 433-34, fn.