

Introduction

Thanks to the numerous accounts of the Uprising, including Evelyn Wood's heroic rehash, the reader of 1907 would have been in no doubt that it was the result of a conspiracy and, furthermore, that the ringleader was Nana Sahib, also known as Dandu Pant, the Peshwa of Bithor.¹ Nana Sahib was the adopted son of the late Peshwa Baji Rao, a Mahratta ruler who had been exiled, but who managed to sustain a small kingdom thanks to the generous pension paid by the British. When the Peshwa died, Nana Sahib inherited his title and possessions, but the Government was not prepared to continue paying a pension and the new Peshwa faced the prospect of losing all his privileges. For years Nana Sahib petitioned the Government in order to have the pension resumed, and he even hired a British lawyer to present his case, but all to no avail. Nana Sahib's resentment of British rule was shared by many Indians who had been adversely affected by the expansion of the Company Raj. The kingdom of Oudh had been annexed in 1856 and the British sent the former king to Calcutta so they could keep an eye on him, along with his retinue. Similarly to Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi had failed in getting her son acknowledged as the rightful heir when her husband died, and her state in the Bundelkhand region had 'lapsed' to the British. During the Uprising, Nana Sahib, the Rani, and a number of other dispossessed rulers emerged as important rebel leaders and their activities prior to the outbreak were suddenly regarded in a new light. What had seemed only mildly suspicious during the early months of 1857 now assumed a definitely sinister appearance.

In 1854, Nana Sahib had dispatched a small delegation led by a Muslim retainer, Azimullah Khan, to London in a final attempt to salvage his income and obtain recognition of his official status. Azimullah did not succeed, and the failed mission was said to have deepened his dislike of the British, turning it into a profound hatred. On the way back to India, Azimullah and his companions went by way of Constantinople and the Crimea, where they met *The Times'* famous war correspondent, W. H. Russell, who was covering Britain's war with Russia. Russell later recalled how Azimullah had exhibited a suspicious interest in the recent British setbacks and the depleted state of their troops, and the journalist took an instant dislike to the man. A member of Azimullah's party, Mahommed Ali Khan, subsequently revealed that they had actually met with Russian agents at Constantinople and discussed the possibility of overthrowing British rule in India.² Back in India, Azimullah had supposedly lost no time in convincing his master that the only way to regain his former power was to turn against the Company.

It appears to be now accepted as a fact that it was the result of a vast Mahomedan conspiracy long organised, and having for its object the re-establishment of its ancient dominion. The Brahminical element in Indian society combined with the Mahomedan for one common purpose, namely, the extermination of the British race.

Bentley's Miscellany, 43 (Feb. 1858), 122

The introduction of the new Enfield rifle to the native regiments of the East India Company's army in 1857 was the immediate cause of the Uprising. The cartridge for the new rifle was greased to ease the process of loading, and it was soon rumoured that the lubricant was composed of cow tallow and pig lard. Since the drill required the cartridge to be torn open with the teeth, this would be ritually polluting and highly offensive to both Hindus and Muslims – the cow being sacred to the former, and the pig *haram*, or forbidden, to the latter. The Uprising broke out on 10 May 1857, when the *sepoys* at Meerut murdered their officers and all the British and Christian civilians that they came upon. The mutineers then proceeded to Delhi where the last Mughal Emperor, the enfeebled Bahadur Shah, was proclaimed king and the city became the symbolic centre of the uprising. The unrest spread across northern India, and in many places the military mutiny assumed the character of a popular rebellion. Indian rulers, who had been dispossessed by the British, reclaimed their thrones, most notably at Delhi, Lucknow, and Cawnpore. With the assistance of British regiments diverted to India, and thousands of Indian troops who remained loyal, the Uprising was eventually suppressed, albeit with considerable losses on both sides, both military and civilian. The military campaigns lasted until 1859, when the last rebels were defeated and British authority was re-established.

In the event, Nana Sahib needed no encouragement and one of his emissaries, Sitaram Bawa, later told the British that his master had been plotting their downfall for years.³ Nana Sahib had allegedly been sending out letters to all the independent Indian rulers to organise a rebellion, but it was only after the British annexed Oudh that his overtures met with any success. During the early months of 1857, Nana Sahib and Azimullah Khan were said to have toured northern India and visited Lucknow, Kalpi, and Delhi on what they claimed was a pilgrimage.⁴ A British officer, who had met Azimullah on the boat back to India, was surprised to see him again at the military station at Ambala and later suggested that he had in fact been on a reconnaissance of all the stations where the Uprising was soon after to occur.⁵ Nana Sahib was also supposed to have met with agents of the deposed King of Oudh and the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah, who naturally shared his aspirations to rid India of the Company's rule.

Combined with the fact that Nana Sahib later led the uprising against the British at Cawnpore, these accounts seemed to prove that he had indeed taken a leading part in a vast plot. [The official historian of 1857, J. W. Kaye, for one, was convinced and stated that 'there is nothing in my mind more clearly substantiated than the complicity of the Náná Sahib in wide-spread intrigues before the outbreak of the mutiny'] In Kaye's magisterial account, *History of the Sepoy War in India* (1864–76), the existence of a conspiracy was not explicit, and the wording of the main text was rather careful when he discussed the unrest at Barrackpore in February and March of 1857: 'To what extent this idea of overpowering the Government had taken possession of the minds of the soldiery, and how far it was ever shaped into a definite scheme of action by those who were moved against us by religious or political animosities, can only be dimly conjectured.'⁷ The circumspection, however, was belied in Kaye's footnotes, where he easily identified the prime movers: 'In my mind there is no doubt of the activity, at this time, of the Oudh people at Garden Reach.'⁸ In spite of the obvious uncertainties and inconclusive evidence, Kaye did not hesitate to point out the dispossessed native rulers and their retinue as the ringleaders – in his footnotes.

If Kaye was somewhat cautious in his description of the plots, G. B. Malleson, who completed Kaye's work after the latter's death, showed no such timidity and is perhaps the strongest and most vocal proponent of the existence of a vast prearranged conspiracy.⁹ Malleson acknowledged that the identity of all the conspirators might never be known, yet he was quite happy to give a detailed description of the conspiracy and the main

plotters.¹⁰ What Malleson described as the 'executive council' consisted of Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi and the so-called Maulavi of Faizabad, a Muslim 'fanatic', who all worked in collaboration with the deposed rulers of Oudh.¹¹ According to Malleson, the *sepoys* were already discontented and 'ready to be practised upon by any schemer', while the annexations and revenue measures led to more general resentment against British rule amongst the Indian population: 'Conspirators to work upon so promising soil were not wanting to the occasion.'¹²

Malleson claimed to have been told by native informants that the Maulavi of Faizabad had been 'selected by the discontented in Oudh to sow throughout India the seeds which, on a given signal, should spring to active growth'.¹³ The evidence was supposedly indisputable, since the Maulavi had, similarly to Azimullah, visited all the locations where mutinies later took place and did indeed lead the rebels at Lucknow:

That this man was the brain and the hand of the conspiracy there can, I think, be little doubt. During his travels he devised the scheme known as the chapáti scheme. Chapátis are cakes of unleavened bread, the circulation of which from hand to hand is easy, and causes no suspicion. The great hope of the Maulavi was to work upon the minds, already prone to discontent, of the sipáhís. When the means of influencing the armed men in the service of the British Government should have been so matured that, on a given signal, they would be prepared to rise simultaneously, the circulation of chapátis amongst the rural population of the North-west Provinces would notify them that a great rising would take place on the first favourable opportunity.¹⁴

The introduction of the new Enfield cartridges provided the plotters with a heaven-sent opportunity to turn the *sepoys* against their masters. 'It was so terrible a thing,' according to Kaye, 'that, if the most malignant enemies of the British Government had sat in conclave for years, and brought an excess of devilish ingenuity to bear upon the invention of a scheme framed with the design of alarming the Sipáhi mind from one end of India to the other, they could not have devised a lie better suited to the purpose.'¹⁵ The British had not been adequately alert regarding the components of the grease, and the rumour of its obnoxious components was soon spread. The *sepoys* were thus tricked into thinking that the Government had deliberately tried to pollute them: once they had lost their religion, they could more easily be converted to Christianity. 'The reader may ask how that was possible, considering that

the cartridges were similar to those they had used for a century', Malleon explained. 'The answer is that fanaticism never reasons. The Hindus are fanatics for caste.'¹⁶ The 'executive council' had skilfully manipulated the *sepoys* to rise against the British by exploiting their superstition and caste prejudices. Malleon could reveal that what appeared as contingent events in 1857 were really something much more sinister: 'Indeed I may go as far as to declare that many of the actors in the drama failed to realise to their dying day that the outbreak was not merely a mutiny which they had to combat, but a vast conspiracy, the threads of which were widely spread ...'¹⁷

The Great Conspiracy

It is hardly surprising that the Indian Uprising should be perceived as a conspiracy. From the assassination of Caesar to the Gunpowder Plot and the French Revolution, conspiracies have played a significant role in Western history. It was also the classic conspiracies that Russell reverted to when trying to convey a sense of the scope and horrors of 1857: 'Hideous massacres of men, women, and children – compared with which Scylla's proscriptions, the Sicilian Vespers, the great *auto da fé* on Bartholomew's Eve, or the Ulster outbreak of 1641, were legitimate acts of judicial punishment ...'¹⁸ A conspiracy was generally understood as the secret plotting of a group of people to carry out a malevolent and treacherous plan, be it a political intrigue or assassination, a massacre or *coup d'état*, or indeed a mutiny. The existence of actual conspiracies provided more elaborate and imaginary conspiracy theories with a semblance of authenticity. The French Revolution in particular gave rise to a proliferation of conspiracy theories, which became a common form of political analysis in the nineteenth century. Above all, they helped make sense to the human mind of complicated events that were otherwise difficult to fathom.

Whereas the Devil had traditionally been considered to be the malignant force behind events which defied explanation, the Enlightenment placed man at the centre of the universe.¹⁹ Taking the place of a strictly theological world-view, conspiracy theories were, in the words of one historian, 'a rational attempt to explain human phenomena in terms of human intention'.²⁰ According to this rationale, there was a direct, mechanistic, connection

between cause and effect. Events were attributed to deliberate human design – things happened because someone had made them happen, and the cause of events could be inferred from their effect. Hence it followed that wars and revolutions were the result of the malignant intentions of evil men driven by avarice and lust for power. Following the French Revolution, conspiracy theories involved groups like the Jews, Freemasons, Jesuits, and various secret societies, such as the Illuminati, who were attributed with fantastic powers, extensive organisation and diabolic intentions towards the subversion of established society.²¹ In the novel *Coningsby* (1844), written before he became British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli thus described the network of influential Jews in powerful positions throughout Europe and explained that 'the world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes.'²² The notion of a conspiracy provided a simple explanation to many different events, subsuming a bewildering number of causes and effects in one single interpretation, and thereby made sense of a chaotic world.

A world-view based on the manipulation of events by hidden forces often led to pervasive panic and what has been described as the 'paranoid style'.²³ Even the most ordinary events assumed a sinister significance, and the absence of suspicious signs was actually seen to confirm the existence of a hidden conspiracy rather than refuting it. The paranoid style, however, was not limited to marginalised and high-strung individuals, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that most people in nineteenth-century Europe thought that conspiracies of some kind were behind many political events.²⁴ In the wake of the French Revolution, fear of Jacobinism was endemic in Britain, spurred on in part by the publication in 1797 of Abbé Barruel's sensationalist *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, and John Robison's melodramatically entitled *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of the Freemasons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*.²⁵ Any kind of secret association was regarded with deep suspicion and the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 made it illegal for people to meet and take oaths. Oath-taking elicited loyalty to an authority other than the state and thus posed an explicit challenge to the presiding establishment. Following the Chartist movements and the Swing Riots in Britain, the emerging workers' unions were also criminalised as secret societies.²⁶ There was at the same time also a widespread fascination with secret societies and conspiracies, as exemplified by Thomas De Quincey who wrote a number of works on the subject, including *Secret Societies* of 1847.

Apart from a Western tradition of conspiracy theories, which informed the representation of the Uprising, colonial lore and its ensemble of tropes provided a strong precedent for the more exotic and outlandish claims of writers like Kaye and Malleon. The dramatic events of 1857 were not to be understood simply as the result of a plot or mutiny; they were a conspiracy of 'Orientals' and thus doubly sinister and, to the European mind, mysterious. In the Western imagination, India constituted an unintelligible enigma. G. O. Trevelyan, a civil servant writing in India just after the Uprising, described the huge divide between the British and their Indian subjects:

We certainly have not yet got to the bottom of the native character. Facts crop up daily which prove incontestably to all ... that the depths of that character cannot be fathomed by our ordinary plummet, or marked with certainty on the chart by which we navigate in European waters. Take for instance those extraordinary symptoms which preceded the great mutiny; the marvellous organization of that vast plot; the mysterious but intimate connexion between the mutineers and the independent native powers; the dim prophecies and ghastly rumours which foreshadowed the outbreak; the secrecy; the unanimity; the tokens passed from hand to hand throughout a million villages.²⁷

The British in India were in effect faced by a conspiracy of an entire culture of which Nana Sahib's plotting was perhaps only the most radical manifestation. That 'Orientals' were cruel and treacherous was commonly accepted by many British in India and found its expression in descriptions of the ruler Tipoo Sahib, for instance, who had been defeated in 1799.²⁸ Intermittent rebellions throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and events like the 1835 assassination of William Fraser, the British Commissioner at Delhi, by an Indian nobleman, only seemed to confirm the stereotype.²⁹ Above all, however, it was the 'discovery' of the murderous Thugs during the 1830s which provided the most obvious Indian parallel to the conspiracy theories of the West. The Thugs were supposedly a fraternity of ritual stranglers who worshipped the Hindu goddess Kali, and they were first introduced to a European readership in Philip Meadows Taylor's hugely successful novel *Confessions of a Thug* of 1839.³⁰ In 1854, a British doctor in India noted that: 'Insane patients very generally dislike natives and, when they suspect conspiracies, notions of Thugs, & c. are very common.'³¹

As early as 1812, during the very first British operations against Thugs, a British official had commented that 'It has been said that these people

compose a regularly organized and secretly tho' extensively connected society similar to that of the Illuminati or other bodies of that description, the influence of which is widely felt tho' the society itself and its members were concealed by a veil of mystery which none but the initiated can draw aside.'³² This comparison with secret societies of the West was to become a recurring theme in colonial accounts of Thuggee and other suspicious Indian practices. A key element in the representation of Thuggee was its geographical ramifications, and the elaborate network of gangs supposed to be working in unison; according to a British account of 1833: 'the Thugs have established a regular system of intelligence and communication throughout the countries they have been in the practice of frequenting, and they become acquainted, with astonishing celerity, with proceedings of their comrades in all directions.'³³ At times the Thug informants themselves reinforced this perception and one bragged to the British that 'he could send a message to Calcutta, or any part of the country, and receive an answer in much less time than the daw[k] [official mail]'.³⁴ One of the key tropes concerning conspiracies was indeed the alleged ability of the plotters to communicate swiftly and in secret; Barruel, who more than anyone contributed to the notion of a great Jewish conspiracy, gave the following account of the manner in which the 'Grand Master of Freemasons' distributed his orders:

from neighbour to neighbour and from hand to hand the orders are transmitted with incomparable speed, for these pedestrians are delayed neither by bad weather, nor by the mishaps that normally befall horsemen or carriages; a man on foot can always get along when he knows the country, and that is the case here. They stop neither to eat nor to sleep, for each one covers only two leagues. The mail-coach takes ten hours from Paris to Orleans, stopping for an hour; the distance is thirty leagues. Fifteen pedestrians, replacing one another, can reach Orleans from Paris in nine hours, using short-cuts and above all never stopping.³⁵

One significant aspect of Barruel's account is the notion of neighbours and 'local knowledge', which aided the conspirators in communicating with great speed. This is reminiscent of the circulation of *chapatitis* in 1857, which were alleged to travel 200 miles in 24 hours, double the speed of mail runners.³⁶ Kaye himself described the mysteries of indigenous modes of communication:

We know so little of Native Indian society beyond its merest externals, the colour of the people's skin, the form of their garments, the outer aspects of their houses, that History, whilst it states broad results, can often only surmise causes. But there are some surmises which have little less than the force of gospel. We feel what we cannot see, and have faith in what we cannot prove. It is a fact, that there is a certain description of news, which travels in India, from one station to another, with a rapidity almost electric. Before the days of the 'lightning post,' there was sometimes intelligence in the Bazaars of the Native dealers and the Lines of the Native soldiers, especially if the news imported something disastrous to the British, days before it reached, in any official shape, the high functionaries of Government. We cannot trace the progress of these evil-tidings.³⁷

A recurring theme within the colonial sphere was the image of the 'jungle drums' purveying hidden meanings undecipherable to the authorities, or secret societies planning to overthrow the colonial rule. There was a fear of things happening just under the surface, unknown to the colonial administration and kept secret by the indigenous population. This perceived or real threat assumed alarming proportions in times of unrest when the British found themselves unable to get access and gather information from certain social strata of their Indian subjects. In this context, the fears associated with the Thugs were merely a distillate of common fears of the indigenous population more generally. Thuggee was only the most sinister association in what might be described as a continuum of secrecy within Indian society, which was in effect inaccessible to the British. The Thugs and the Uprising of 1857 embodied all that the British feared from their Indian subjects: when combined they constituted the ultimate scenario of colonial paranoia. In a very real sense the accounts of Kaye and Malleon and other British historians emerged from an acute crisis of trust in the Indian population.

Less esoteric and more commonplace perceptions of India also influenced the interpretation of 1857. During the European revolutions of 1789 and 1848, the riotous mobs were usually seen as having been manipulated by the real ringleaders, who nevertheless remained hidden. Such an understanding of popular protest and violent upheavals was easily adapted to an Indian context. Partly in reflection of contemporary British society, but also as a means of distancing the 'Oriental' from the ideal of the free-born Englishman, Indian society was understood as being completely under the sway of a strict social hierarchy imposed by the caste system. Accordingly, it was inconceivable that any Indians could act without the explicit sanction of their betters – in

this case the Brahmin priesthood. During the 1830s, similar observations had been made regarding the Thugs who were supposedly guided by the priests in the temples of their goddess: 'It is well known that these priests give information to the thugs of the movements of travellers, and the despatch of treasure. They suggest expeditions, and promise the murderers, in the name of their goddess, immunity and wealth, provided a due share of the guilty spoil be offered up at her shrine.'³⁸ The more significant implication of the alleged involvement of the priests was that the evil of the Thugs was seen to reflect on all Indians who, due to the caste system, were bound by the commands of the Brahmins: 'How little astonishing is it, then, that we find a class of fellow creatures, like the thugs, so sunk in the depths of infamy, when the people are led by such unprincipled leaders.'³⁹ Hence it followed that Hindu *sepoys* would never act on their own: indeed, they *could not act* on their own.

If Hindus were bound to follow the biddings of the priestly caste, Indian Muslims were regarded as inherently fanatic, and thus equally susceptible to the bigoted preaching of their *maulavis*. The mutiny of the *sepoys* in 1857 was thus, by inference, guided by the hands of their religious leaders. According to some, it was the different religious groups which manipulated each other; as the *Westminster Review* put it: 'The Hindoo *Sepoys* were made the dupes and instruments of their more crafty Mussulman comrades.'⁴⁰ The bottom line was nevertheless the same: the majority of the *sepoys* who mutinied were seen to have no agency of their own. It was, after all, much easier to put faces to a few ringleaders than to the great anonymous 'mob,' which was merely the tool of others. Assigning blame to the real masterminds furthermore absolved the British of any responsibility. The Uprising happened because the *sepoys* and Indian population had been misled by 'designing men' and not because they harboured any real grievances against British rule.⁴¹ After British rule had been restored, reconciliation between rulers and subjects would be possible only if a few individuals could be held responsible, and not the entire native population.

The emphasis on the misguided *sepoys* and their religious fears, in regard to the cartridges, meant that any political aspirations they may have held were ultimately discredited. To the British, the Uprising constituted a rejection of modern technology and of the progress offered by British rule, in favour of superstition and idolatry: 'The progress of railways and the mysterious electric wire aroused undefined apprehensions, and it must have appeared that the alien race had, indeed, resolved to establish itself permanently in the

land. A conspiracy at such a crisis, among such a people, and for a common object, cannot be considered an unnatural, if it was an unexpected, event.⁴² The Uprising was thus seen to be inherently reactionary and aimed to restore the old order – ‘Oriental’ despotism and religious fanaticism. Like the Jesuits in Europe, the secret leaders of the Uprising pursued their sinister aims through subterfuge.⁴³ Hindu and Muslim priests hid base political aims behind feigned religious piety, employing mendicant *yogis* and *fakirs* to spread sedition under the guise of devout asceticism. Similarly, Nana Sahib and other rulers were professing their friendship to the British at the very same time that they were plotting their treason.

During the Uprising, the British were faced not by an ordinary opponent, but by one that embodied in their minds every negative characteristic of the ‘Orient’: ‘From no such hideous picture of vile passion has the veil been ever so suddenly torn away ... Faithless to his salt, and true to his vile instincts, the *Sepoy* has all at once become revealed to us as a practised torturer, a cowardly assassin, and a lustful fiend.’⁴⁴ There was a sense that the Uprising was not just a political conflict, but a struggle between two races and hence between two basic principles: the British and the treacherous ‘Orientals’, representing respectively good and evil, progress and barbarism. This dichotomy to some extent mirrored classical conspiracy theories in which the forces of good were threatened by the forces of evil in the shape of the Jesuits, Jews or other malevolent secret societies. One of the key features of conspiracy theories was the pathological terminology; if epidemics were often described in military terms, with disease ‘invading’ and ‘attacking’ the body, conspiracies and internal challenges to the state (or the body politic) were often perceived in the distinctly epidemiological language of ‘viruses’ and ‘contagion.’⁴⁵ Like an outbreak of the plague, conspiracies and insurgency spread within the healthy body of loyal subjects and had to be cut away for the state to survive. The pathological terminology has perhaps rarely been applied with such consistency as in the context of 1857, and while Kaye described Nana Sahib and his retainers as ‘the germs of a cruel conspiracy’, Malleon’s chapter on the escalation of the Uprising is simply entitled ‘The Spread of the Epidemic.’⁴⁶ It is also noteworthy that Malleon applied a distinctly Western terminology, commonly associated with secret societies, in his account of 1857. The reference to an ‘executive council’ implied the existence of a formalised leadership and well-organised secret society, which would make the reader of the day think of revolutionary anarchists or indeed Jesuits and Freemasons.⁴⁷

V. D. Savarkar and the myth of conspiracy

The account of the conspiracy of 1857 drew upon a well-established repertoire of both Western and Orientalist stereotypes, which provided much of the imagery and terminology.⁴⁸ Interestingly, Indian historians of the twentieth century readily appropriated this colonial representation of the Uprising. While the British were celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of 1857, and fearing its second coming, an Indian nationalist in London was reappropriating that same history. Written in 1907–8, V. D. Savarkar’s *The Indian War of Independence*, 1857 provided a distinctly anti-British account of the Uprising, intended to inspire the ongoing struggle against colonial rule. Savarkar was deeply involved in the nationalist circles based at India House in Highgate and took part in the counter-celebrations during the anniversary years. His book was written in response to the British celebrations in 1907 and simply inverted the account of conspiracies so common to the colonial historiographies that Savarkar consulted in the British Library; Kaye and Malleon’s gallery of villains was thus turned into a memorial of national heroes. Curiously, Savarkar adopted the same pathological terminology; only he applied it in reference to the adverse effects of colonial rule. Similar to an epidemiologist, Nana Sahib had supposedly diagnosed the ‘chronic symptoms’ of the ‘terrible disease of slavery’ that was afflicting India in the shape of the East India Company, and realised that the sword was the only ‘cure.’⁴⁹ In describing the resulting upsurge of Indian patriotism, Savarkar nevertheless took recourse to geological metaphors, the first part of the book being ‘The Volcano’ followed by ‘The Eruption.’⁵⁰ By describing the Uprising in such terms, the author presented the emergence of Indian nationhood as a natural force – a manifestation of the inherent destiny of the Indian people.

• The historical narrative of *The Indian War of Independence* closely followed that of its British sources, with Azimullah Khan first hatching the plan in London, and Nana Sahib subsequently plotting the Uprising with other Indian leaders. In Savarkar’s retelling, the conspiracy assumed enormous proportions and involved the tacit support of both Russia and Turkey, while diplomatic relations were allegedly forged with Egypt and Persia.⁵¹ Secret agents and emissaries of the immense ‘Revolutionary Organisation’ were preaching sedition to the *sepoys* all across the subcontinent, and gypsies told of the imminent downfall of the British to

awaken the national feeling among the local population.⁵² Not surprisingly, the 'Secret Organisation' of 1857 was said to rely on clandestine meetings and religious oaths, and any traitor to the cause was immediately put to death.⁵³ The success of the conspiracy was so complete 'that not much inkling of what was going on could reach even such cunning people as the English, until the explosion actually took place'.⁵⁴ When the British authorities became suspicious and started opening the letters of the conspirators, 'a sort of code was composed of dots and numbers', which effectively prevented the Government from guessing the dangerous contents.⁵⁵ In describing the mysterious circulation of *chapattis*, Savarkar imbued the conspiracy with an overt religious significance and the *chapattis* themselves became a sort of nationalist sacrament:

Some silly Government officials tried to get hold of these *Charpates*, cut them to small crumbs, powdered them, and powdered once more, and tried if they could give some message; but, like witches the *Charpates* had no tongue when they were asked to speak. The *Charpatee* spoke only to those it meant to speak to. It was made from wheat or millet flour. Nothing was written on it; yet it inspired the men who knew it with a strange Revolutionary energy at its very touch. The *Chowkidar* of every village had it. He ate a bit of it first himself and gave the rest, as *Prasāda*, to those who asked. The same number of *Charpates* were made afresh and sent to the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages. The *Chowkidar* of the latter place would send it to yet another village and so, this fiery red cross of India travelled from village to village, kindling with flames every village it touched.⁵⁶

Accordingly, Savarkar took all the most stereotypical tropes of the colonial representation of 1857 and incorporated them in his nationalist epic by a mere inversion of their moral thrust. In one significant divergence from the standard accounts, however, Savarkar claimed that the British had *deliberately* greased the Enfield cartridges with the blood (*sic*) of cows and pigs.⁵⁷ This turned the historical doubt and suspicions into hard facts, and Savarkar thus transformed the outbreak into a justifiable pre-emptive strike against the cunning plans of the British Government. When the *sepoys* Mangal Pandey single-handedly turned on his British officers in March 1857, it was thus an inspiring act of heroic resistance against the calculated subversion of his caste.⁵⁸ Similarly, when the *sepoys* eventually broke out at Meerut on 10 May, and murdered British men, women, and children, they were responding to a

century of repression and followed a carefully prepared plan.⁵⁹ The outbreak was, in other words, a justified thwarting of the attempt by the British to ruin India.

Savarkar's terminology clearly owed more to the likes of Mazzini and other European revolutionaries and anarchists than to the history of nineteenth-century India. Taking his cue from Malleson, Savarkar described the 'secret structure of the Revolutionary Organisation', which involved a 'chief committee' of 'Revolutionary Leaders', as well as 'inner circles' and 'secret societies', thus inventing an anachronistic genealogy for the nationalist revolutionary movement of his own time.⁶⁰ The spirit of 1857 was still alive, he proclaimed, and the revolutionaries of the twentieth century were continuing the struggle begun by Nana Sahib and other rebel leaders.

Even before the book was published in English under a pseudonym in 1909 it had been banned due to its seditious contents. The British authorities applied the pathological terminology when referring to the 'virulent poison of the Mutiny Book', and its potential effect on Indian readers was compared to that of drugs.⁶¹ The following year, charges were brought against Savarkar under the Sedition Act, and in 1910 he was sentenced to two terms of transportation for life to the Andaman Islands for his supposed links to an Indian revolutionary who had assassinated a British politician in London. Savarkar later emerged as one of the most important radical Hindu leaders, and was implicated in the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. His work on 1857, however, provided a lasting blueprint for an Indian version of the history of the Uprising – one in which conspiracy assumed a key role. Whether it was viewed as a deceitful plot, or a glorious underground movement, the notion of a grand conspiracy behind the Uprising of 1857 proved to be remarkably persistent.

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As a true conspiracy theory, the conventional interpretation of the Uprising of 1857 is entirely teleological; because Nana Sahib assumed a leading role in the Uprising, it is assumed that whatever he did prior to the outbreak was related to it. The documentary evidence for the existence of a widespread conspiracy is, however, rather dubious, and in most instances is not supported by any verifiable material. Of the handful of accounts that describe the alleged conspiracy, not a single one precedes the Uprising itself. Although he wrote several letters warning of native discontent in the early

months of 1857, it was only seven years later that Lieutenant Martineau remembered his meeting with Azimullah Khan at Ambala and tied it in with the supposed plot:

Azim-Oollah then, as a skillfull agent, was doubtless feeling his way, was able from his reports to work on the mind of the Nana already incensed by the stoppage of the stipend accorded to the ex Peshwa, to induce him, shortly after his return to visit Lucknow, there doubtless to confer with Alli Nuckee Khan & other servants of the ex king.

Of course I thought little of these things on my meeting Azim-Oollah at the Umballa dak bungalow, tho' rather wondering what exactly could have brought him there.⁶²

Similarly, Russell did not write of his encounter with Azimullah Khan at the Crimea until 1860 – long after Nana Sahib had become the evil ringleader of the conspiracy in the British imagination, and the emissary's demeanour could be reinterpreted retrospectively.

The 'confession' of Azimullah's companion, Mahommed Ali Khan, which mentioned the meeting with 'real or pretended' Russian agents at Constantinople, is most likely a literary invention, or a highly embellished tale.⁶³ The author, Forbes-Mitchell, presented his meeting with Mahommed Ali Khan as a 'strange story' and furthermore provided the preamble that most of the people who were in India at the time had probably forgotten about it. It is actually a moral tale in which the rebel recants on the eve of his execution and acknowledges the fact that the British are more honourable than their opponents. Asked why Nana Sahib had ordered the murder of British women and children, Mahommed Ali Khan explains: 'Asiatics are weak, and their promises are not to be relied on, but that springs more from indifference to obligations than from prearranged treachery. When they make promises, they intend to keep them; but when they find them inconvenient, they choose to forget them. And so it was, I believe, with the Nānā Sāhib.'⁶⁴ This is hardly credible as the confessions of a repentant rebel and the voice is clearly that of the British narrator. Mahommed Ali Khan thus belongs in the same category as Philip Meadows Taylor's famous Thug-informant, Ameer Ali, in the thoroughly fictionalised *Confessions of a Thug*. This form of colonial ventriloquism legitimised British rule by having preconceived notions of Indians and Indian society confirmed by the natives themselves – even if those informants were invented.⁶⁵

The same applies to the famous 'autobiography' of Sita Ram, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, which is often hailed as the only authentic account from the hands of a *sepooy* during 1857.⁶⁶ Allegedly told to his British officer, Sita Ram's life and career is a veritable catalogue of colonial lore, covering unlikely attacks by Thugs, amorous adventures, captivity by both Afghans and mutineers, and every single military campaign, from the Nepal War of 1813 to the Uprising of 1857. The narrator, however, is most likely a composite figure based on a British officer's knowledge of the Indian *sepooy* as a generic character.⁶⁷ Sita Ram's account of the Uprising thus appears to be culled directly from the pages of Kaye and others, and closely follows the standard version of the conspiracy:

It is my humble opinion that this seizing of Oudh filled the minds of the *sepoys* with distrust and led them to plot against the Government. Agents of the Nawab of Oudh and also the King of Delhi were sent all over India to discover the temper of the army. They worked upon the feelings of the *sepoys*, telling them how treacherously the foreigners had behaved towards their king. They invented ten thousand lies and promises to persuade the soldiers to mutiny and turn against their masters, the English, with the sole object of restoring the Emperor of Delhi to the throne.⁶⁸

The story has all the hallmarks of the picaresque novel. Like Meadows Taylor's Ameer Ali, who unknowingly strangles his long-lost sister, the loyal Sita Ram is also ordered to execute his own son, who is a mutineer. The 'autobiography' is at best heavily edited and, at worst, a complete fabrication; it certainly does not provide a spontaneous account of 1857 as seen through the eyes of a *sepooy*.

The single most detailed account of Nana Sahib's grand conspiracy was given by one of his emissaries, Sitaram Bawa, who was questioned by the British at Mysore in 1858.⁶⁹ As opposed to the accounts of Mahommed Ali Khan and Sita Ram, there is no doubt whatsoever that this highly elaborate description of the conspiracy is authentic – the question is whether the information divulged is credible. According to Sitaram Bawa, Nana Sahib had been involved in several intricate conspiracies, one of which dated back to the 1830s, and was plotting with all the remaining Indian princes and rulers for the overthrow of British rule. At the same time, the main initiative behind the conspiracy is ascribed to Nana Sahib's 125-year-old guru, Dassa Bawa, who was lavishly rewarded for predicting that his master would become as

powerful as the former Peshwa.⁷⁰ The centegenarian guru is also said to be behind the circulation of *chapattis*:

The cakes in question were a *jadoo* or charm, which originated with Dassa Bawa, who told Nana Sahib that he would make *jadoo*, and as far as these magic cakes should be carried, so far should the people be on his side. He then took the reed of the lotus, or rumul, called mukhana, and made an idol of it. He then reduced the idol to very small pills, and having made an immense number of cakes, he put a pill in each, and as far as the cakes were carried, so far would the people determine to throw off the Company's raj.⁷¹

All Europeans were to be ambushed and killed in one single night, after which Nana Sahib and Bahadur Shah had planned to divide the future rule of India between them. The Russians declined to join in the conspiracy, but they promised that if Nana Sahib captured Delhi, they would help drive the British from Calcutta.⁷² 'The military classes were enticed,' Sitaram Bawa further stated, 'by a promise of restoring the old times of license and they all prefer that to a regular form of Government.'⁷³

Inconsistent and contradictory, Sitaram Bawa's story appears to be based mainly on rumours and hearsay, and indeed he admitted as much himself: 'Every person, particularly every Brahmin, is well acquainted with all this, and the fact of these letters having been written, why, every Baboo in Calcutta knew of it.'⁷⁴ Rather than the solid evidence of a conspiracy from one of the plotters, Sitaram Bawa's testimony thus appears to be no more than an Indian equivalent to the British conspiracy theories: full of intriguing details but short on verifiable substance. It is certainly noticeable that not one of the major Indian rulers whom Sitaram Bawa denounced as co-conspirators actually joined in the Uprising. All the available evidence furthermore speaks against any form of prior communication between Bahadur Shah and Nana Sahib; during the later trial of the Emperor, he was implicated in various and altogether unlikely conspiracies, yet no one suggested a combination with Nana Sahib.⁷⁵ Furthermore, not a single letter from Nana Sahib's extensive correspondence in the years preceding 1857, and in which he allegedly plotted the uprising, has ever been found. Sitaram Bawa's grand conspiracy is accordingly not supported by any circumstantial evidence.

Many disaffected rulers were involved in intrigues aimed to regain their former status and glory, and inevitably to the detriment of British rule. Often these intrigues amounted to no more than exchanges of letters in which

common grievances were listed and hopes for future cooperation expressed.⁷⁶ Much of this plotting consisted simply of wishful thinking, and most rulers appear to have been amply supplied with soothsayers, astrologers, and other retainers ready to confirm their masters' aspirations. Similarly to Nana Sahib's guru, a soothsayer interpreted one of Bahadur Shah's dreams to mean that 'the King of Persia with his army would annihilate the British power in the East, would restore the King to his ancient throne and reinstate him in his kingdom, and at the same time the infidels, meaning the British, would be all slaughtered.'⁷⁷ Such sycophantic predictions probably served to nourish the dreams of many once-powerful Indian rulers, but rarely led to more concrete actions. It is noteworthy that Sitaram Bawa, who made much of the existence of a conspiracy, nevertheless stated that 'the *sepoys* began to make plans among themselves' and further 'that the plot among the *sepoys* first took place.'⁷⁸ This would seem to support the idea that the intrigues at the various Indian courts followed the mutiny of the *sepoys* and did not precede it. The outbreaks at Meerut and Delhi were furthermore said to have been 'mistakes' (i.e. premature), and therefore not under the guidance of Nana Sahib or part of his plot.⁷⁹

It is particularly noteworthy that the three most significant rebel leaders, namely Bahadur Shah, Nana Sahib, and the Rani of Jhansi, all reacted to the initial outbreak of the Uprising by contacting the British. The very day that the Meerut mutineers arrived in Delhi, the Mughal Emperor sent a messenger to Agra, informing the authorities of what had occurred, and 'prayed for assistance, and the restoration of order.'⁸⁰ Later the same day he nevertheless did assume the formal command of the Uprising and bestowed his blessings on the mutineers. When Nana Sahib learned of the outbreak on 16 May, he met with his British friends and immediately offered his support against the mutineers.⁸¹ Following an agreement with Colonel Wheeler, the officer in charge, Nana Sahib and his retainers took over control of the treasury five days later, and a native writer even reported that Nana Sahib sent out men 'to apprehend runaway *sepoys* from Delhi and Etawah.'⁸² It was not until the beginning of June that Nana Sahib met in secret with the *sepoys* of the station, and even then his support for their cause was not certain.⁸³ When the *sepoys* broke out in mutiny on 5 June, they gave Nana Sahib an ultimatum: 'a kingdom was prepared for him if he joined them with all his wealth: or death if he sided with the Europeans.'⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, Nana Sahib chose the first option. Having plundered the station at Cawnpore, while the British were holed up in Wheeler's entrenchment, the mutineers left for Delhi and

Nana Sahib had to convince them to return and fight the British under his leadership.⁸⁵ Nana Sahib had probably been playing it safe all along, waiting to see what the outcome of the disturbances would be, before he finally committed himself to the cause of the mutineers. This, however, is a far cry from his being the mastermind of 'a deep laid plot of conspiracy' that had matured for years and was successfully brought to fruition in May 1857.⁸⁶

Similarly, the *sepoys* at Jhansi broke out on 8 June and massacred the forty-eight British men, women, and children who were then present in the town. Four days later the Rani of Jhansi declared in a letter to the British Commissioner at Jabalpur that she had not been able to prevent the murders, and requested the support of British troops to fight off her local rivals.⁸⁷ She later engaged in a lengthy diplomatic exchange with British officials before finally throwing in her lot with the rebels in early 1858.⁸⁸ While these alleged members of Malleson's 'executive council' were clearly pragmatic in the policies they pursued, and stood to benefit from the overthrow of British rule, theirs were not the actions of callous conspirators. Whatever role they eventually played in the Uprising, there is nothing to suggest that they planned it and executed it, as is claimed in much of the conventional literature.

The outbreak reassessed

While a number of noted historians of 1857, such as Majumdar, Sen, and Stokes, have rejected or strongly modified the notion of a widespread conspiracy, it nevertheless remains the standard explanation.⁸⁹ The existence of a grand conspiracy is not only one of the most persistent themes in the literature on 1857; it is also one of the most persistently under-researched aspects of the Uprising. Very few authors, popular or academic, dedicate more than a brief opening chapter to the subject of the supposed conspiracies, and the outbreak at Meerut is usually treated as a minor incident which has to be covered in order to get to the really important events of the Uprising. The one exception is J. A. B. Palmer's slim monograph, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut in 1857*, published in 1966.⁹⁰ Focusing very narrowly on the events leading up to the outbreak, as I do, Palmer is nevertheless hampered by a thoroughly old-fashioned approach to history. In Palmer's analysis, every single event was the result of a carefully pre-orchestrated plot in which Sunday 10 May

was chosen because the heat of the month would work to the disadvantage of the British troops, who would be in church and thus unprepared when the outbreak occurred, exactly an hour and a half before sundown, which would allow the mutineers time to get away in the dark.⁹¹ The panic that initiated the disturbances in the late afternoon of the tenth was deliberately raised in the bazaar, which was on the route that the British troops would have to take, so as to hamper their movements later on. The night before, a British officer was furthermore warned of the uprising, and the telegraph lines between Meerut and Delhi were also cut prior to the outbreak. These were facts, Palmer boldly concludes, 'which make it absolutely certain that the outbreak was indeed premeditated and planned in advance among the Meerut troops'.⁹² Within such a mechanistic world-view, there is no room for contingencies or chance, and things happen because someone made them happen. If accounts of the Uprising no longer make use of the crassest stereotypes, which characterised Kaye and Malleson's work, the notion of a conspiracy has changed little since the heyday of colonial historiography.

Written in 2005, Saul David's *The Indian Mutiny* is currently one of the most popular accounts of 1857, and one which reiterates the basic outlines of Malleson's plot as proven fact, including Azimullah Khan's 'hefamous tour'.⁹³ David claims that the existence of 'secret committees coordinating the uprising is supported by a wealth of documentation', and yet he struggles to reconcile the mounting evidence of *sepoys* plotting with the conventional story of Nana Sahib's master-plan. The resulting account is fraught with tension. If there was a 'civilian' conspiracy, how did it relate to the plotting of the *sepoys*?⁹⁴ If Nana Sahib planned the Uprising, why was he forced to join the mutineers under threat of death?⁹⁵ With echoes of Palmer's positivism, David also exhibits a rather crude notion of what the *sepoys'* fears were about, stating that, since no greased cartridges were actually distributed, 'the lack of genuine grievance prompts the speculation that some guiding hand – within or without the regiments – was trying to keep the cartridge controversy alive by switching attention from the grease (which was no longer an issue) to the paper'.⁹⁶ The implication is that the 'guiding hand' first spread the rumour and subsequently kept it alive by manipulating the *sepoys*. The same teleological take on history is evident in David's description of the Mangal Pandey incident. The 'aborted rising' of the lone *sepoys* failed in part because Mangal Pandey's 'co-conspirators' were not yet ready. And when Mangal Pandey called out that British troops were coming to disarm the *sepoys*, David argues, this 'had clearly been decided upon as the best way

to win over waverers.³⁷ Time and again, an unnamed agency is invoked, as men and issues are manipulated by agitators and conspirators who, however, remain anonymous. The conspiracy of 1857 is thus cursorily mentioned but never fully explained; it is taken for granted yet not fully proven.

William Dalrymple's hugely successful account, *The Last Mughal* (2006), has set a very high standard for new interpretations of the Uprising, but even he sidesteps the issue of the actual outbreak.³⁸ In *The Last Mughal*, the Uprising simply arrives in Delhi on 11 May 1857, in the form of the invading mutineers, with only the briefest attempt at explaining the preceding events. While the fall of Delhi obviously changed the nature of what had started as a minor outbreak, Dalrymple's focus on the Mughal capital risks giving the erroneous impression that the Uprising of 1857 began and ended in Delhi. A history of the outbreak at Meerut, on the other hand, can only ever strive to explain the initial stage of the Uprising. That is admittedly a rather less ambitious undertaking, but no less relevant for that. The 150th anniversary of 1857 has seen a spate of new and innovative works on the Uprising, yet none has added significantly to our understanding of the alleged conspiracies and the outbreak itself. The facts surrounding the issue of the greased cartridges are still debated, and often misrepresented, and the interested reader will look in vain for a detailed account of how they affected the *sepoys*. How could rumours of contaminated ammunition spark a mutiny when not a single greased cartridge was ever distributed to the *sepoys*? The character of the outbreak of the Uprising of 1857 is no better understood today than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. What was this event that set off the bloodiest rebellion against British rule in the nineteenth century and forever changed the history of the Raj?

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There is today little debate as to why the Uprising of 1857 took place, and only the significance attributed to the individual causes have changed since the days of Sayed Ahmed Khan's *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, first published in 1858.³⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, British rule had radically transformed India: Christian missionaries were increasingly active and the telegraph and railway were slowly but steadily being extended to cover the entire subcontinent. Native rulers and local elites were dispossessed as the East India Company expanded its possessions and introduced new tax and revenue regulations in accordance with Utilitarian ideals. While

some Indian classes, such as Hindu moneylenders, were able to benefit from these changes, many others were adversely affected by British policies, and pastoral communities, for instance, were often forced off the land to allow sedentary peasants to settle. The British administration was not only ill-informed of local society and customs, but also arrogant, and it suppressed local resistance with great brutality. At the same time, there was a complete breakdown of communication and trust between the British officers and Indian troops, during a period when new army regulations threatened the status and livelihood of the *sepoys*. The Uprising is therefore often seen as a natural effect of British rule in India.

The apparent inevitability of a rebellion against British rule has nevertheless overshadowed the interpretation of what happened at Meerut and Delhi on 10 and 11 May 1857, and within the historiography the analysis of the outbreak has been overdetermined by a teleological understanding of subsequent events. If a mutiny amongst the native troops of the Bengal Army was inevitable by 1857, and it appears that it was, there was nevertheless nothing inevitable about the time, place, and nature of the outbreak. There was nothing about the situation in northern India in January 1857 that gave forewarning of the violent scenes that were to unfold some five months later. The fact that the wives and children of the native troops who mutinied at Meerut were unprepared and left behind provides a further strong indication that not even the mutineers had anticipated the outbreak when it eventually did occur. Assuming that the oppressive nature of British rule in India is sufficient explanation for the violence of the Uprising also ignores the fact that many Indians sided with the British. The disruption and hugely detrimental effects of the British annexation of Oudh, for example, does not help us understand why individuals acted the way they did on 10 May 1857: why the crowd of the Meerut bazaar so readily joined the mutinous *sepoys*, while one-quarter of the 11th Bengal Native Infantry remained loyal to the British. Or why the butcher Mowla Baksh cut the foetus from Mrs Chambers' womb, while some Indian servants saved their British masters at the cost of their own lives.

The relationship between the long-term causes of the Uprising and the specificities of the outbreak itself is by no means obvious, which is precisely why historians have evoked conspiracy theories as a *deus ex machina* to make the connection between structure and event. In the following, however, I seek to replace the conspiracy theories with an *événementiel* micro-history of the outbreak that foregrounds the contingencies and ambiguities of the event against the backdrop of long-term developments, rather than the other way

around.¹⁰⁰ To understand the outbreak, we have to focus on the event itself (to the extent that the sources permit), while keeping in mind the manner in which the wider context and developments of the preceding decades impacted and framed that event. Following the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins' perceptive discussion of the relationship between structure and event, my account seeks to explore the 'basic dynamic of escalation' and how larger issues were expressed through local conflicts and vice versa.¹⁰¹ Long-term structures created the conditions within which minor issues were endowed with greater significance, and I suggest that a detailed examination of the tipping point – the moment when decades of relatively peaceful coexistence turned into violent animosity – may add to our understanding of the Uprising.

My approach to the subject is further inspired by George Lefebvre's groundbreaking study of rumours and panics among the peasantry during the French Revolution, *The Great Fear of 1789*.¹⁰² I do not pretend to be a historian of equal skill to Lefebvre, though I hope this book might at least go some way towards explaining the outbreak of 1857 in a manner similar to his work on the French Revolution. My ambition is, in the words of George Rude, 'to chart in precise detail the course of a movement by noting the days, and even the hours, of its appearance: by such means alone can the old bogey of rampaging "mobs" and ubiquitous "conspiracies" be laid to rest, or at least be reduced to proper historical proportion'.¹⁰³ That is to say that I make the rumours, panics, and their consequences the object of a study in their own right. The accuracy of rumours is essentially immaterial, and whether or not they were true, they had very real consequences. The fears and grievances of the *sepoys* have to be taken seriously if this event is to be understood; the *sepoys* were not a superstitious rabble, nor were they the passive dupes of scheming conspirators.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Uprising has often been interpreted by Indian historians as a peasant rebellion, and Ranajit Guha in particular has analysed 1857 in the context of a model of popular insurgency.¹⁰⁴ This structuralist reading of the Uprising, however, is not quite adequate in explaining events at Meerut and Delhi, where neither the *sepoys* nor the civilians could appropriately be described simply as peasants. When the British wrote of the treacherous betrayal of Indian mobs, who cruelly butchered their masters, Guha reads it simply as noble peasants resisting their oppressors. Yet it is not obvious to me that a mere inversion of colonial accounts constitutes a sufficiently sophisticated approach to the material. I

believe that the dynamics of urban riots, which have been eminently described by Stanley Tambiah, Veena Das, Paul Brass, and others, in the context of contemporary South Asia, provide a rather more convincing framework within which to reassess the violence that characterised the events of 1857.¹⁰⁵ If not 'elementary aspects', there are nevertheless certain recurring patterns to be discerned.

In her critique of Rudrangshu Mukherjee and his interpretation of the Cawnpore Massacres, Barbara English suggests that it may be impossible to construct a model that could explain the unnecessary and indiscriminate slaughter involved in a massacre.¹⁰⁶ This is nevertheless what I shall attempt to do with the outbreak at Meerut, and in so doing I will argue that, for those involved, the violence was neither unnecessary nor indiscriminate. The notion that rebel violence 'replicated' that of the British, as Mukherjee has suggested, may perhaps more appropriately be applied to the outbreak at Meerut, albeit with some modification.¹⁰⁷ While British rule was undoubtedly oppressive and brutal, there is no straightforward correlation between colonial and rebel violence in 1857. The desperate ferocity that characterised much of the rebel violence was of an altogether different nature from the sustained everyday brutality of the colonial state.¹⁰⁸ But the violence of the outbreak at places like Meerut and Delhi can be understood as a direct response to the *perceived* threat of British intervention in Indian society more generally. In that sense it was a pre-emptive attack that derived its terms from the intentions ascribed to the British, and this accounts for the retributive character of much of the violence.¹⁰⁹ The violence of the outbreak did not occur in the context of British mass executions or bloody counter-insurgency operations, but as a defensive act against something far more intangible and thus far more threatening: the apparent subversion of the *sepoys'* entire way of life.

Accordingly, the 'Great Fear' of the title refers not only to colonial paranoia following 1857, but also to the fear of Indians, which preceded the outbreak. C. A. Bayly has famously used the notion of 'information panic' to describe the inability of the British to effectively gather and interpret information relating to indigenous practices and movements.¹¹⁰ This concept can be applied to Indian misreading of the British as well. The Uprising was in fact precipitated by what I think may appropriately be described as an 'information panic' amongst the *sepoys* and part of the Indian population, who saw in British reforms and the introduction of the Enfield rifle a direct attack on their culture and society. Religion represented the social order of Indian society

for both Hindus and Muslims, and the *sepoys'* fears of the greased cartridges thus embodied much more general concerns over British intrusion.

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In the following, I have sought to rely as much as possible on primary sources produced before 10 May 1857, so as to minimise the post-*'Mutiny'* bias and teleological rationale that characterises much of the later material. The paucity of Indian accounts nevertheless poses a real problem, and historians have access to only a very limited range of sources representing, with greater or lesser accuracy, the voice of a mere handful of either rebel or loyal Indians. Any conclusions based on such a limited amount of material obviously cannot make any claims of being comprehensive in terms of the totality of Indians who took part in these events. It is the best we can do, however, and I have endeavoured to make the most of the native testimonies given during the trial of Bahadur Shah, and the accounts of Mainodin, Shaikh Hedayut Ali, and Mohun Lal.¹¹¹ The documents collected by George W. Forrest and Major Williams' inquest at Meerut also contain numerous detailed testimonies from Indians, which allow us to approach the subject as more than just an account of what one British officer wrote to another.¹¹² Accordingly, we have to content ourselves with trying to recover an Indian perspective only when it was recorded by the British. This entails a disproportionate focus on British experience, but I still believe that it provides us with a more complete picture and that it is only by reading the colonial archive against the grain that we might better understand Indian participation in the events of 1857.¹¹³

In responding to Barbara English's criticism, Rudrangshu Mukherjee defended his use of a specific account of events at Cawnpore in 1857, stating that 'Like all historical sources, Nanak Chand's diary has biases and inconsistencies, but handled with care and with the conventional checks that historians employ when handling any source, it does reveal interesting aspects of the uprising.'¹¹⁴ The same observations apply to the material upon which this book is based; paraphrasing Mukherjee, I believe I can show that my use of these sources has been careful.¹¹⁵

The following pages present my attempt at reconstructing the events of the period between the first murmurs of unrest following the rumour of the cartridges in January 1857, to the final and bloody outbreak at Meerut and Delhi on 10 and 11 May. The argument presented here departs from the conventional histories of the Uprising, which take for granted the presence

of a grand conspiracy. While there were Indians plotting against the British, the extent of these conspiracies has never been fully assessed and scrutinised in light of the empirical evidence. None of Malleson's 'executive council' plays a significant role in my account of the outbreak and there is in my opinion nothing to suggest that any of the rebel leaders who later emerged took part in events prior to May 1857. Like a number of dispossessed Indian rulers, Nana Sahib probably was involved in intrigues against the British all along, but this was a common aspect of Indian politics, and he rose to prominence and assumed a leading role only after events had already been set in motion. Nana Sahib was not a prime mover, nor was Bahadur Shah, the Maulavi of Faizabad or the Rani of Jhansi. Their involvement in the events of 1857 was hesitant and responsive rather than callous and manipulative.

This study instead focuses on the *sepoys* and to a lesser extent the civilians who joined in the outbreak at Meerut and Delhi. It was amongst the *sepoys* that the initial plots were hatched and it was the *sepoys* who first took up arms. This is not to deny the role played by civilians in 1857, but the fact remains that the events of 10 and 11 May constituted a crucial breaking point and created a precedent from which everything else followed. Once the *sepoys* of the 11th and 20th Bengal Native Infantry and the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry had risen at Meerut, and the Mughal Emperor had been reinstated at Delhi, the Uprising gained a momentum of its own, irrespective of what had previously been planned or plotted. History rarely unfolds according to the plans and aspirations of men, and the history of 1857 is indeed more complicated than implied by the neat assertions of a great conspiracy. The Uprising did not simply erupt or spread like a wildfire; it was smouldering for months and only gradually got under way in the most faltering manner.

Lancer Pistol, both of which were smoothbore and loaded similarly to the Brown Bess.⁷

The ammunition for the 1853 Enfield rifle, which was to replace both the Brown Bess and the Brunswick, combined the paper cartridge of the former with the greased patch of the latter. One end of the Enfield paper cartridge was thus lubricated with grease to facilitate loading and to ensure a tight fit.⁸ The *sepoys* would have to hold the greased end, where the bullet was, and tear open the other end to pour the powder down the barrel, before ramming the paper cartridge with the bullet down the barrel, greased end first. For firing drills with either the Brown Bess or Enfield, troops used ungreased cartridges without balls, as the aim was simply to practise the process of loading and firing.⁹ The paper cartridges for the Brown Bess and the Enfield were not the same and had to be pre-fabricated by trained men.

Prior to the official introduction of the Enfield rifle, the pre-greased cartridges had to be tested to see if they could withstand the climate. *Sepoys* in India and Rangoon accordingly carried the cartridges around for several months in 1853 before it was determined that they were suitable, and during this trial the troops made no objections. At the time a British officer did actually make the Military Board aware of the potential problem posed by the grease, stating that: 'unless it be proven that the grease employed in these cartridges is not of a nature to offend or interfere with the prejudices of caste, it will be expedient not to issue them for test to Native corps, but to European soldiers only to be carried in pouch.'¹⁰ Unfortunately this warning went unheeded.

The only troops to be armed with the Enfield rifle, and hence the greased cartridges, were the British HM 60th Rifles stationed at Meerut, who were initially supplied with pre-greased ammunition from Britain. However, from August 1856 onwards, the grease for the cartridges was made at the arsenal of Fort William in Calcutta.¹¹ The grease was thus made in India, following instructions from Britain, using beeswax (stearine) and tallow (animal fat), the latter of which was supplied locally by Gangadhar Banerji & Co. Greased cartridges were eventually manufactured at the arsenal of Fort William, Calcutta, and at the stations at Dum Dum and at Meerut, but the grease itself appears to have been made at the former location only. From January 1857, *sepoys* in groups of five from the various regiments of the Bengal Army undertook instruction in the drill and use of the Enfield rifle at the stations of Dum Dum, Ambala, and Sialkot.¹² Although the making of cartridges was part of this drill, no *sepoys* came into contact with the grease or handled

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The Greased Cartridges

In 1853, the East India Company decided to modernise the weapons employed by the *sepoys* of the Bengal Army, and introduce the new Enfield Pattern 1853 Rifled Musket.¹ The musket then in use by the infantry of the Bengal Army was the muzzle-loading smoothbore Brown Bess, which had changed little since the eighteenth century, except for the replacement of its flintlock with a percussion lock in 1842.² The ammunition for the Brown Bess consisted of a paper cartridge with a pre-measured amount of powder and one round; in order to load the weapon, the cartridge was torn open with the teeth, the powder was poured into the barrel, and then the cartridge with the bullet was rammed down. A percussion cap was placed on the nipple of the lock and when the trigger was pulled, the hammer would ignite the fulminate and fire the musket. The *sepoys* of rifle companies, who usually functioned as skirmishers, were, however, armed with the 1838 Brunswick two-groove rifle.³ The rifled barrel allowed for a tighter fit of the bullet and gave it a spin when fired that greatly increased its speed and accuracy. To ease the process of ramming down the bullet and to make a tight fit once loaded, the rifle necessitated the use of a lubricated patch that was wound around the ball, instead of the paper cartridge used in the smoothbore musket. A small number of native troops on the North West Frontier were also armed with the Minié Rifle, which relied on its conically shaped bullet with applied grease for a tight fit.⁴ The grease for the patches of the Brunswick two-groove rifle, and for the Minié, was supposed to be composed of linseed oil and beeswax, but it appears that various other types of lubricant were also used, including mutton-fat, wax, and coconut oil.⁵ Small numbers of the *sepoys* would accordingly have been familiar with the use of greased ammunition.⁶ Native cavalry were armed with either the 1842 Victoria Carbine or the 1842

greased cartridges at any point during the instruction prior to 10 May.¹³ In January 1857, a rumour nevertheless spread at Dum Dum, that the grease on the Enfield cartridges consisted of the fat of pigs and cows.¹⁴

To come into close contact with fat from these two animals would be extremely offensive to both Hindus and Muslims, and as the loading of the Enfield required that the cartridge was torn with the teeth, it followed that the *sepoys* might even come to ingest some of the odious grease.¹⁵ Having one's ritual purity defiled was no trifling matter for high-caste Hindus; they would be regarded as untouchables and shunned by relatives, friends, and other members of their caste. In order to have their caste restored, they would have to undergo elaborate rites of purification, which included feasting Brahmin priests and making offerings at important pilgrimage sites. Apart from the obvious social and religious stigma, having one's caste restored thus entailed a significant economic burden as well. For the Muslim *sepoys*, the eating of pork was strictly forbidden, but the impurity itself could be allayed through prayers and repentance.

This was by no means the first time this issue was raised. During the First Afghan War, 1839–42, the *sepoys* had had to forgo a number of their observances, such as washing before each meal, and they also had to accept food prepared by Muslims.¹⁶ Their British officers personally supplied them with warm *poshteens* or sheepskin coats against the cold of the mountainous region, but wearing these was offensive to the Hindus. The Muslim *sepoys* also found it hard to reconcile the fact that they were serving an infidel government against other Muslims. The campaign was a catastrophic disaster, but once the *sepoys* who survived the gruelling retreat from Kabul returned, the real implications dawned on them; as one Indian officer described it: 'None of the Hindoos in Hindoostan would eat with their comrades who went to Afghanistan, nor would they even allow them to touch their cooking utensils; they looked upon them all as outcasts, and treated them accordingly.'¹⁷ In practice, the socio-religious doctrines were more flexible than the scriptures allowed, and for both Hindus and Muslims exceptions were often made if the pollution was accidental or through necessity. The rumour of the greased cartridges nevertheless constituted a significant affront to their religious sensibilities.

It certainly caused a very 'unpleasant feeling' among the *sepoys* who were receiving instructions in the use of the Enfield rifle at Dum Dum.¹⁸ The story of how the rumour actually came about was later to be endlessly repeated: allegedly a *khalasi* or labourer of low caste, who worked at the depot, asked

a *sepoy* of the 2nd Bengal Native Infantry for some water from the soldier's *lota* or drinking vessel. Brahmins and high-caste Hindus always carried a *lota* so that they could drink water anywhere without having to bring to their mouth anything that might have been polluted by the touch of a person from a lower caste. The *sepoy* indignantly declined the inappropriate request, and the *khalasi* responded: 'You will soon lose your caste, as ere long you will have to bite the cartridges covered with the fat of pigs and cows.'¹⁹ Was this true?

According to the Inspector-General of Ordnance, Colonel A. Abbott, 'No extraordinary precaution appears to have been taken to insure the absence of any objectionable fat.'²⁰ During a later inquiry into the composition of the lubricant, Lieutenant Currie, Commissary of Ordnance at the arsenal at Fort William, was questioned on the issue:

Question: You stated in your evidence on Saturday, that before the 27th January, cartridges were issued to the Delhi magazine from the arsenal, already greased; what are the orders you have received on the composition of grease for the use of cartridges?

Answer: The grease was to be made of six parts of tallow and one part of bees-wax.

Question: Of what ought that tallow to consist?

Answer: No inquiry is made as to the fat of what animal is used.

Question: You do not yourself know what fat is used?

Answer: No, I don't know.

Question: Is not the intention of Government that the tallow to be used in the preparation of grease should be mutton or goat's fat?

Answer: It is not the intention of Government that all grease used in any preparation in the magazine is to be made of goat's and sheep's fat only [italics added].²¹

Similarly, Colonel Abbott stated that he 'was told that the composition was that which the regulations prescribed, and that the tallow *might or might not* have contained the fat of cows or other animals [italics added]'.²² Accordingly, the army did not actually know what the tallow used for the grease was made of and could not exclude the *possibility* that it contained cow tallow and pig lard. Since the presence of obnoxious grease could not be ruled out, and may indeed have been likely, the Governor-General, Charles Canning, later stated that the *sepoys'* worries were 'well founded'.²³ When the story of

the *khalasi* was repeated, from one *sepoys* to the next, and from the military lines to the civilian quarters and beyond, the Indian troops certainly did not doubt the tale. A contemporary native account of the affair, by one Nund Singh of Amritsar, provides a good indication of how the story might have been told amongst the *sepoys*:

Near Calcutta, five coss [about 14 miles] distant from it, there is a place called Achanuk [Barrackpore]. There is a Government cantonment at that place. At that place a Hindostanee²⁴ was drawing water out of a well. A 'Chumar'²⁵ came in and asked the Hindostanee to give him water to drink. The Hindostanee told him that he had better go to some other place to drink water.

'How,' said the Hindostanee, 'can I give you water to drink? You are a Chumar.'

Upon this words were exchanged between them. The Chumar said: 'You do not give me water to drink and affect to be so religious; and the fat of the cow and pig which I prepare with my own hands you will bite off with your teeth.'

These and similar words having been exchanged between them, they came to blows. The other people, who had heard the talk about the 'fat,' rescued the 'Chumar,' and made inquiries from him in a conciliatory manner.

Then two men went along with him to that place [the place where cartridges were said to be made], which was a little removed from the cantonment. There they saw with their own eyes about fifty or sixty Chumars working and putting on the fat of both animals on the cartridges. They returned from thence homewards, and described all to the Soubahdars²⁶ and other officers.²⁷

Though not very accurate, this version did emphasise the key elements of the rumour and furthermore added 'proof' of its veracity. If the British authorities could not ascertain the composition of the tallow, it is nevertheless unlikely that the Indian labourers possessed more concrete knowledge or that a simple visit to the factory could settle the issue. According to another account, a Bengali clerk at Calcutta was given the task of translating into vernacular the manual for the Enfield rifle in early January 1857, and in the process learned that the prescribed grease contained the fat of cows and goats.²⁸ The British manual, however, simply referred to the use of 'tallow' without any indication of what animal it should come from – hence the confusion. According to *The Delhi Gazette*, the Government's inquiries had revealed that 'the mutton fat ordered, had really been exchanged by the contractor for bullock's fat.'²⁹ This was also incorrect, but when even Anglo-Indian newspapers reported

that the cartridges were greased with cow's fat, it is not to be wondered that the story was widely believed.

The rumour was actually said to have spread all over India, and some of the *sepoys* undergoing instruction at Dum Dum explained to their British officer that when they returned to their respective regiments their friends would refuse to eat with them. The officer, Brevet-Captain Wright, sought to allay the *sepoys'* fears, assuring them that the grease was made up with mutton fat and wax, which were, given the context, both inoffensive substances. The *sepoys* replied: 'It may be so, but our friends will not believe it; let us obtain the ingredients from the bazaar and make it up ourselves; we shall know what is used, and be able to assure our fellow-soldiers and others that there is nothing in it prohibited by our caste.'³⁰ Thus it seems that the main concern of the *sepoys* was the stigma associated with handling the cartridges, and the actual nature of the grease might have been secondary to the fear of being ostracised.

The day after he spoke with the *sepoys*, Brevet-Captain Wright informed his superior, Brevet-Major Bontein, who commanded the depot at Dum Dum, and suggested that the men be allowed to purchase the materials for greasing the cartridges as they had suggested. Bontein immediately ordered a parade, on 22 January, and called for the *sepoys* to come forward if they had any complaints, which two-thirds of them did. In 'a manner perfectly respectful' they stated that the composition of the grease used on the new cartridges was 'opposed to their religious feeling' and they suggested that a mixture of oil and wax be used instead.³¹ Apparently Bontein was already familiar with the rumour, but now felt compelled to report the matter to his superiors, and thus the issue of the greased cartridges became official and began its way through the bureaucracy of the East India Company.

The fact that these concerns were raised before the cartridges had even been distributed is testament to the impact of the pre-emptive rumour and its potentially devastating consequences to the social status of the *sepoys*. Whether they had actually handled the cartridges or not, whether the grease contained pig and cow fat or not, the *sepoys* who went for instruction at the depots were all in risk of being stigmatised – that is, unless they made a public disavowal of the cartridges. But then the *sepoys* of the Bengal Army were no ordinary soldiers.

The Company and the *sepoys*

A number of the castes, the status of which was taken more or less for granted in 1857, had actually emerged a mere century before.³² The decline of the Mughal Empire had caused significant political and social turmoil, but it also enabled groups such as the Rajputs and Bhumihars, or agricultural Brahmins, of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, to establish a high-caste status through military service. This entailed a combination of the warrior ideal with the ritual purity and social privilege of Brahmin priests, who were at the very top of the traditional caste hierarchy. These peasant soldiers were known as *purbiyas* or easterners.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the East India Company became increasingly entangled in politics and slowly changed from a trading venture into a state in its own right. To protect its trade, honour local alliances, and later expand its territorial possessions, the Company had to rely on Indian soldiers and for that purpose built an army of *sepoys* trained by British officers on European military principles. At the time, however, the British were still an emergent power and as such had to compete on equal terms with political rivals, both Indian and European, in the recruitment of native troops. Much of the Company's legitimacy as a state power was in fact derived through the continuation of pre-colonial practices, which included the establishment of an army of high-caste Hindu *sepoys*. As a result, the Company in Bengal tapped into the military labour market of north India and used the existing networks of patronage and clan-ties by recruiting peasant regiments directly from the *zamindars* or landholders of Bihar, Benares, and Oudh. This resulted in an extremely homogeneous body of *sepoys* in the Bengal Army, composed mainly of Brahmins, Bhumihars, and Rajputs. Accommodating high-caste usages and practices within its regiments was an effective means by which the East India Company could become an attractive and legitimate military employer in eighteenth-century India. Reluctant to interfere too much in local governance, British policy-makers during this early period generally sought to adopt and preserve Indian traditions and institutions as far as possible. The Company thus managed to establish a loyal base of recruitment by employing the rhetoric of high-caste status as well as the promise of regular pay.³³

At the same time, the indigenous military labour market was becoming increasingly constricted as the British, with the help of the *sepoys*, expanded their sphere of influence. By 1818 the Company had established an effective

monopoly of power on the subcontinent, having defeated or pacified Indian rulers and states that would otherwise have provided employment for thousands of Indian troops. By formalising and codifying a social system that they understood but poorly, the British in effect constructed a high-caste army, which maintained its status irrespectively of the changes that were taking place in Indian society at large. Whilst the ideal of the high-status warrior was dying out due to the enforced demobilisation of native armies elsewhere, the Company's army kept alive the spirit of the martial tradition of the past. The Bengal Army, which constituted the military force throughout the newly ceded and conquered territories in north India, provided the perfect frame within which the reinvented high-caste military tradition of the Bhumihars and Rajputs could be formally institutionalised. It presented the *sepoys* with the opportunity to improve and secure their new-found status: service in the Company's army thus became one of the most significant means by which high-caste Hindus asserted their socio-religious status.

In order to bolster the high-status profile of its army, the British allowed the observance of the dietary and ritual requirements of Hindus, and encouraged their religious festivals; at times the regimental colours were incorporated in the religious festivals of the *sepoys* and worshipped as idols. This in effect created a military religious tradition, which reflected the exalted status of the *sepoys*. By endorsing and encouraging the high-caste status of the *sepoys*, the British were also able better to control their native troops and ensure continued support from the local landowners in the regions that supplied the recruits. As the Company was extending its foothold on the Indian subcontinent, the *sepoys* not only became the means by which the stability and authority of the colonial state could be maintained; they also became a vital link between the British rulers and their Indian subjects more generally. More than any other Indian group or community, it was the *sepoys* with whom the British came into close contact, and through whom much of their knowledge of the land was initially derived.

Although the British themselves encouraged high-caste practices amongst the *sepoys*, the Western drill and perception of discipline, as well as practical requirements, often clashed with the special considerations of the native troops. The earliest and most serious rupture occurred at Vellore in the Madras Presidency in 1806. In order to make the appearance of the *sepoys* more uniform and in keeping with a Western military aesthetic, it was ordered in 1805 that they could no longer wear caste-marks or jewellery while on duty, and they had to trim their beards.³⁴ These regulations interfered directly with

most visible markers of identity and status, and were thus greatly resented by the *sepoys*. The following year a new type of headgear was introduced to replace the existing model, which the British considered to be impractical and altogether too similar to a turban. The new hat resembled the stove-pipe shako worn by the musicians of the regimental bands, who were often Christians, as well as by the British troops. Being in the service of the British, who were thought of simply as Christians, put the *sepoys* at constant risk of being polluted by their employers' religion. The deeper implications of the new regulations and headdress, as far as the *sepoys* and local population were concerned, were that the troops were being made to look like the British in order to make them Christians. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Madras army had previously suffered from irregularities in the financing and payment of its troops.

Although the East India Company did not allow missionaries to preach and convert in India until 1813, the British were widely believed to be working towards the conversion of all their subjects. The cultural divide between rulers and ruled meant that many official measures and interventions were seen in this predominantly religious light. By wearing the hats of the Christians, the *sepoys* apparently feared they would become Christians themselves and they would certainly be regarded as such by their relatives and caste members. It was openly stated that no one would marry the *sepoys*, and some were apparently told by their own wives that they would no longer cook or sleep with them if they accepted the new headdress. The fear of being ostracised had an immense effect on the *sepoys*, who would do anything to avoid the odious appellation of 'topi-wallahs' or 'men with hats' – a common term of abuse for the British. The bond between the British and their Indian *sepoys* was in part based on the assumption that the rulers would never impose Christianity on their subjects, whose traditional beliefs they were obliged to uphold. Any new regulation or measure that could be perceived as impinging on religious issues was accordingly perceived as a breach of faith on the part of the British. Under such circumstances, the *sepoys* felt they were relieved of their oath of loyalty.

In the fort at Vellore, the sons of the late Tipoo Sahib were kept in exile by the British, and the presence of these representatives of the old order provided the discontented *sepoys* with a cause around which to rally. The *sepoys* had nightly *panchayats*, or meetings, during which they swore to kill all the European troops when the time came and to keep silent about the plot. Some of Tipoo Sahib's sons, along with their retainers, appear to have

encouraged the *sepoys* with the promise of increased pay once they were reinstated as rulers. During the early morning of 10 July 1806, the *sepoys* broke out in mutiny, killed most of their officers and other British troops, and took over the fort. They failed, however, to coordinate the mutiny outside the fort, and when British reinforcements arrived the following morning, the rebellious *sepoys* were quickly defeated and several hundred killed or later executed. The mutiny was largely blamed on the religious sensitivity and superstition of the *sepoys*, as well as the treacherous plotting of the exiled princes. The events nevertheless highlighted the fact that the acceptance of British authority in India was rather precarious, even amongst its closest allies, the *sepoys*. Any interference by the British was perceived as part of a conscious plan to convert their Indian subjects, and in that respect the *sepoys* were particularly vulnerable. The loyalty between the army and its native soldiers was conditional on the maintenance of a fine balance that could easily be overturned. Shortly after the Vellore Mutiny, the British officer in command stated that 'there was an idea among the troops that it was the intention of Government to force them to relinquish everything that distinguishes one caste from another, and by degrees to convert them to Christianity; that they also suspected the Europeans intended to massacre the native troops.'³⁵ This would not be the last time these worries were voiced by *sepoys*.

In 1824, the high-caste observances of the *sepoys* of the Bengal Army led to another violent clash. It was widely claimed that Hindus would lose their caste if they crossed the 'kala pani' or black water: that is, if they crossed the sea. This belief actually had no scriptural precedent, but seems to have been established on the grounds of more practical issues at the time. High-caste Hindus could not eat any food that had been prepared by or been in physical contact with a person of a lower caste; they certainly could not share pots or drinking vessels, or eat in a communal mess. Onboard a ship it was virtually impossible for *sepoys* to observe their dietary purity, such as cooking their own food and eating by themselves, and provisions were likely to be handled by any number of people.³⁶ A number of general issues commonly associated with long travels amongst Hindus probably played an additional role in the perceived prohibition against crossing the sea. Most of the *sepoys* of the Bengal Army came from a peasant background and had little or no experience of the sea; they may simply have been averse to risking their lives on the ocean and engaging in service far from their homes. Overseas service could entail years of being absent from their families, to whom the *sepoys* were much attached, and to whom they forwarded a large portion of their pay. When parents

died, their children were furthermore supposed to tend to their funeral and perform certain rituals, and this added another disincentive for the *sepoys* to leave the shores of their ancestral home. Water from the sacred Ganges river (or one of its tributaries) was also a prerequisite for various purification rituals among north Indian Hindus, including the absolution of sins at the time of death, and being unable to access Ganges water therefore posed a potential problem. As a result, *sepoys* could only be transported by ship if they volunteered for this, and those who did were paid an extra allowance, known as *batta*, which apparently assisted them in overcoming these fears (and the possible financial consequences of their being deemed 'outcast' by villagers at home).³⁷ The British were in fact prepared to spend considerable resources and time marching troops across land rather than transporting them by sea. In time, however, this notable exemption of service became a key source of contention between the British command and the *sepoys*.

In 1824 several regiments of the Bengal Army were assembled at Barrackpore, waiting to be marched to Rangoon as part of the British campaign in Burma. It would have been faster to sail across the Bay of Bengal, but to avoid the pollution associated with crossing the sea, the regiments were to be marched on foot to Rangoon via Chittagong. Unfortunately, there were insufficient bullocks to carry the *sepoys'* personal possessions, which weighed 23 lbs per man in addition to their equipment, and they were ordered to carry these themselves or leave them behind. But the *sepoys* flatly refused to march without their *lotas* and personal utensils, carpets and quilts, which would allow them to observe their dietary and ritual purity during the march. As at Vellore, they swore an oath on Ganges water, the holy *tulsi* plant, and the Koran, not to march until the British supplied more carriage cattle or increased their extra allowance. It was furthermore rumoured that once they had reached Chittagong, they would be forced to board ships and sail to Rangoon after all.³⁸ At one point the *sepoys* armed themselves, and when they refused to lay down their weapons and comply with the orders of their officers, the British opened fire on them with artillery. Several hundred of the mutineers were killed immediately or subsequently hunted down and executed. It later emerged that two Muslim officers had told the *sepoys*, most of whom were Hindus, that if they did not obey orders, they 'would there and then make them eat from the same dish', and further that 'they would make them eat cow's flesh and the Mussalmans that they should eat hog's flesh'.³⁹ The two officers were generally disliked by the troops, and in the tense situation their goading of the recalcitrant troops had the unfortunate effect of

reinforcing the *sepoys'* resentment. Peer pressure and threats had furthermore assured solidarity amongst the Hindu and Muslim *sepoys*. According to a Muslim *sepo*, 'those *sepoys* who were Hindus objected to go on board ship and told the Mohammedan *sepoys* that if they went to the Colonel they would kill them, consequently we did not go but endeavoured to please them'.⁴⁰ Following the brutal suppression of the mutiny at Barrackpore, *sepoys* of the Bengal Army seem to have developed an almost paranoid fear of the British turning their artillery against them. To the British, however, the incident demonstrated the impracticality of having a high-caste army unwilling to compromise ritual practices.

By the 1830s the political climate was changing and, motivated by a civilising zeal and the rise of Evangelicalism, the British could no longer defend their non-intervention policy or the need to perpetuate pre-colonial practices and customs.⁴¹ In 1834, a General Order was passed to allow for the recruitment of a wider range of Hindu and Muslim groups in order to break the high-caste monopoly of the Bengal Army.⁴² Gurkha battalions had already been established after the Company's war with Nepal in 1814–16, and following the Sikh Wars of 1845–6 and 1848–9, both Sikhs and Muslims from Punjab entered the Bengal Army in increasing numbers. General enlistment constituted an open challenge to the social exclusivity formerly maintained by the high-caste *sepoys*; if low-status groups could enlist alongside the Rajputs, Bhumihars, and Brahmins, service in the Company's army no longer constituted a guarantee of high status. It directly undermined the identity and ritual purity of the *sepoys*. It furthermore fundamentally challenged their security and livelihood, since a father might no longer be followed by his son (as had been commonplace) in the Company's employment.

At the same time, the presence of missionaries was becoming increasingly conspicuous across the subcontinent, and the fear of conversion apparently permeated Indian society.⁴³ While the actual number of Indians converted during the first half of the nineteenth century was quite negligible, the underhand methods used by some missionaries, including the conversion of orphans they adopted, led to considerable resentment.⁴⁴ Missionary schooling, providing an 'English' education with a strong Christian element to Indian pupils, was also becoming more common, and conversion as a means of upward mobility for lower castes challenged the existing social order.⁴⁵

The British were particularly worried that the activities of missionaries might stir up trouble amongst the *sepoys*; a native soldier who converted to Christianity in 1819 was promptly removed from his regiment, and some

Company officials actually blamed the mutiny at Barrackpore in 1824 on the presence of missionaries.⁴⁶ It also caused some embarrassment to the Army, when it emerged in 1857 that the British commander of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry had been preaching to the *sepoys*.⁴⁷ When called upon to explain himself, Colonel Wheeler stated that for the past twenty years he had 'been in the habit of speaking to the natives of all classes, *sepoys* and other, making no distinction, since there is no respect for persons with God, on the subject of our religion, in the highways, cities, bazaars and villages (not in the lines and regimental bazaars)'.⁴⁸ Wheeler was subsequently declared unfit to command a regiment.

Yet the prevalent fear of conversion was the result not so much of actual missionary activity as of the gradual intrusion into everyday life by a foreign government thought to be inherently Christian.⁴⁹ The abolition of *sati* in 1829, for instance, did not directly affect many Indians – it was an extremely rare practice with fewer than a thousand cases being recorded in Bengal between 1815 and 1829.⁵⁰ With the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, the British nevertheless appeared to continue the same policy by allowing Hindu women to remarry after the death of their husbands.⁵¹ In a highly patriarchal society, this seemed to suggest that the position of women would be completely changed under British rule, which could only be perceived as a threat to the prevailing social order. For the Indian population it was virtually impossible to discern between the civilising and the proselytising zeal of the British, if indeed such a distinction existed. When Christian missionaries told the *maulavis* and *pandits* that they should not keep their women in *purdah*, and that they should not circumcise their children or practise child-marriage, it was simply assumed that they were speaking for the British Government.⁵² At Patna in 1845, the authorities came to realise how prevalent these fears were:

Reports had been for some time current to the effect that the British Government purposed to destroy the caste of the Hindoos, and to abolish Mahomedanism by forbidding the initial ceremony through which admission is obtained to the number of the Faithful. And to this was added another lie, scarcely less alarming, that the *Purdah* was also to be prohibited, and that Mahomedan females of all ranks were to be compelled to go about unveiled.⁵³

When common messing was introduced in the colonial jails during the 1840s, it provided a further impetus to the fears of some that the Government

was seeking to undermine the caste and religion of a part of the Indian population entirely in its power.⁵⁴ The practice of obliging prisoners of different castes and creeds to eat together was highly offensive to the high-caste Hindu inmates. At the same time, prisoners were no longer allowed to prepare their own food, but had to receive their meals from the hands of cooks whose social status might be polluting. Another cause of contention was the removal of prisoners' brass vessel, the *lota*, which allowed high-caste inmates to maintain their purity – this was not possible with the earthenware vessels that replaced them. The prisoners' protests over these infringements of their dietary practices were widely supported by the Indian community outside, as the native police officer, Shaik Hedayut Ali observed:

In course of conversation these people said to me, if any of our brothers commit any offence and by the laws of the land they get punished; that is all very right and proper, and we have nothing to say against it, but that law must be bad which by its infliction ruins our religion, – for instance, when any one is sentenced to imprisonment, immediately on his reaching the prison, his beard and moustache is cut; this to us is a great insult. In jail it is ordered that the prisoners should eat in messes, the Mahomedans by themselves and the Hindoos by themselves; this is no outrage to a Mahomedan, but it is a great one to the feelings and religion of a Hindoo. One Hindoo won't eat from the hand of another unless they happen to be brothers or cousins ... When a Hindoo is released from prison he is always tabooed by his family and looked upon as having lost caste: on this account both the prisoner and his relatives become disaffected towards the Government.⁵⁵

Sepoys openly voiced their fears that they might be the next to suffer the same fate at the hand of the Government. Like the prisoners, *sepoys* were subject to official rules and had their dietary habits disciplined by army regulations. In a show of solidarity with Brahmin and Rajput inmates who had rioted in the jail at Sahabad, several *sepoys* wrote to them that 'the day on which the English shall attempt to destroy our religion, every regiment will revolt'.⁵⁶ The unrest in the jails coincided with the war against the Sikhs and the excitement caused by a tentative British attempt to carry out a census in Patna, 'a movement which was at once declared to be part of the great scheme of the Government for the forcible conversion of the people'.⁵⁷ Members of the local Muslim elite in Patna were supposedly distributing money to the *sepoys* in order to make them leave the service of the Company, and it was rumoured that the King of Delhi had promised a month's salary to those troops who joined in

the plot. Thanks to the information provided by several loyal Indian officers, the planned rising was prevented by the local authorities, although rumours persisted for some time: 'It was stated that a royal mandate had come from the King of Delhi; that the Rajah of Nepaul was ready to send a great army sweeping down into the plains; and again it was said that the Sikhs were the prime movers of the plot.'⁵⁸

There were certainly those who yearned for the old days and thought that the clock might be turned back by ousting the British. As was the case at Vellore, this appears to have happened when the grievances of dispossessed Indian rulers coincided with those of the *sepoys*. In 1822, several anonymous letters were found in Arcot, which called upon Muslims and Hindus to unite against the British, who were taking over the land. The *sepoys* were furthermore encouraged to mutiny and kill their British officers accorded to a carefully laid plan, with a promise that they would be well remunerated for their participation. Around the same time an anonymous petition from the local troops complained that civilian administrators received the control of land once it had been conquered by the Company, while the soldiers, who had fought for this, were not rewarded.⁵⁹ Nothing further came of these communications, although they did indicate a certain level of dissatisfaction. Ten years later a similar plot was discovered at Bangalore, although this time the preparations were well under way. With the aid of the Company's *sepoys* and demobilised troops of the Raja of Mysore, a group of local leaders planned to take over the fort at Bangalore and kill all the British officers. At the same time, a dead pig was placed at an *eidgah* or outdoor mosque along with a wooden cross, to cause an outrage that would be directed at the British authorities.⁶⁰ The conspiracy came to light when a loyal Indian officer informed his superiors and the ringleaders were either executed or imprisoned. In these affairs, the promise of increased pay plays a significant part in the attempt to seduce the *sepoys*. When Sitaram Bawa in 1858 claimed that the 'The military classes were enticed by a promise of restoring the old times of license', he was accordingly drawing on a well-established idea of the mercenary character of Indian soldiers.⁶¹ The Indian *sepoys* were not simply hired hands lusting for plunder, but they do seem to have maintained enough of the traditional mercenary instinct to be dissatisfied with the conditions under which they served the British.

By the 1850s, the relationship between the *sepoys* and the British officers was characterised by increasing distance and growing resentment. Grievances over inadequate pay, the removal of privileges, lack of opportunity for

promotion, and a corps of British officers with a poor understanding of Indian culture did nothing to improve the *sepoy's* loyalty to the Company. It is not that the bond between soldiers and officers had suddenly deteriorated; mutiny was endemic in the East India Company army, and indeed was a part of the traditional terms of employment which the *sepoys*, to some extent, still assumed were in place. The century following 1757 was one of continuous negotiations between the British and their Indian troops, caused in part by the incommensurability of British notions of a standing army and Indian terms of military service. In 1838, before the First Afghan War, extra *batta* was introduced for *sepoys* serving beyond the Indus river, but this was withdrawn after the conquest of Sindh in 1843, when fighting came to an end. The *sepoys* of the Bengal Army who were to be stationed in Sindh on a more or less permanent basis were therefore not accorded extra pay, and this was bitterly resented. Several regiments en route to the frontier refused to follow orders or receive the reduced rate of pay, and they were eventually replaced with regiments from Madras. Six ringleaders of the mutinous 65th Bengal Native Infantry were executed and 32 were given prison sentences, while the entire 34th Bengal Native Infantry was disbanded in disgrace.⁶² This situation repeated itself during the Second Sikh War when extra *batta* was reintroduced and then withdrawn once the campaign was over. This time, however, the *sepoys* seemed to have been more organised in their protest, as 'Delegates from several corps went about from station to station, and letters were exchanged between those at a distance.'⁶³ There was a general fear among the officers that the defeated Sikhs might join forces with the mutineers, and at Delhi, the British found 'unmistakable signs of a confederation of many regiments determined not to serve in the Punjab except on the higher pay.'⁶⁴ Five ringleaders of the mutiny in one regiment were sentenced to transportation for life, and the 66th Bengal Native Infantry, which had tried to seize the fort at Govindgarh in 1850, was disbanded and its name struck from the army list. Time and again, the *sepoys* and the Company clashed over issues such as pay and religious practices, as the native troops sought to negotiate their terms of employment. Some events, however, were beyond their reach.

The annexation of Oudh in 1856 had a significant impact on the *sepoys* of the Bengal Army, since some three-quarters of the troops hailed from that region.⁶⁵ The British had dispossessed the King of Oudh on the pretext of his alleged despotic misrule, and the takeover caused immense disruption.⁶⁶ As a result of the new revenue settlement, the traditional landowners experienced a severe loss of privileges and possessions, as many were expropriated after

forfeiture of their lands. The 50,000-strong local army was demobilised, thus flooding Oudh with armed men harbouring a strong resentment against the Company. 'Oude was the birthplace of the Purbeah race,' according to Mainodin, a native police officer well acquainted with the *sepoys*, 'and these feelings of dissatisfaction affected the whole Purbeah race in the service of the British Government. To the native mind the act of annexation was one of gross injustice, and provoked a universal desire for resistance. The King, and all those connected with him, although bowing to the hand of fate, became henceforward the bitter enemies of the English.'⁶⁷

While the links between the *sepoys* and their homeland should perhaps not be exaggerated, it is obvious that the annexation and political turmoil in Oudh provided another source of discord. The British no longer maintained a respectful relationship with the local elites, who had hitherto facilitated recruitment, and the annexation might thus be perceived as a direct affront to the *purbiya sepoys* and yet another infringement of their status. The state they were serving had taken over their home region, by what *sepoys* perceived as a deceitful and treacherous means.⁶⁸ One loyal Indian, referring to the British as 'we', overheard *sepoys* complaining about the annexation, stating that 'they did not like our settlement system introduced in Oude, and one of them being a "Subadar" added that, he was a native of "Gaya" in Bengal, he had some landed property there, the more he laboured to improve his land for increasing the cultivation, the more he was assessed by the settlement officer.'⁶⁹ For the majority of the native troops, who did not themselves own land back home, the news received from their villages would nevertheless have informed them of how the world to which they once belonged was being turned upside down.⁷⁰ A cavalry trooper from Oudh complained that 'I used to be a great man when I went home; the best in my village rose as I approached; now the lowest puff their pipes in my face.'⁷¹

The General Service Enlistment Order, passed in 1856, was perhaps the final blow to the confidence of the *sepoys*; the order decreed that new recruits would have to serve wherever they were ordered, including overseas. While this applied only to new recruits, it obviously caused concern amongst the *sepoys*, as it seemed to suggest that they might all in time be deployed regardless of the original terms of their enlistment.⁷² As one Indian police officer, Hedayat Ali, described at the time, 'Any new order issued by Government is looked upon with much suspicion by the Native Army, and is much canvassed in every regiment.'⁷³ The days of special treatment, when the British had to ask for volunteers for their foreign campaigns, were definitively over.

The Hindu *sepoys* of the Bengal Army were not simply high-caste – being in that army was to a large extent what *made* them high-caste. The concern over pollution amongst the troops in 1857 was actually a throwback to the social struggles and conflicts of the eighteenth century, during which Rajputs and Bhumiars had established themselves as high-status groups through the appropriation of Brahmin practices concerning ritual purity.⁷⁴ Status and identity were not rigid, as the notion of the strictly hierarchical caste system seemed to imply, but flexible and in constant flux. Any perceived infringement on their social status by the army therefore threatened to undermine the identity of the *sepoys*. Whereas the British had originally provided the guarantee of *sepoys'* status, service in the army now became a liability. The exalted social status enjoyed by the high-caste Hindu majority in the regiments furthermore extended to the other *sepoys*, including the Muslims, Sikhs and other Hindus. The British had created a distinct military tradition, which provided a shared sense of identity and united the *sepoys* regardless of background and creed. This was indispensable in maintaining the *sepoys'* fighting power and loyalty to the Company, but it also carried the potential for solidarity among the native soldiers *against* their British commanders. And this certainly seemed to characterise the situation in January 1857, as the rumour of the greased cartridges began to take hold.