



Voices, Memory and Resistance: A Subaltern Study of the 1857 Uprising in Delhi

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Abstract

This paper revisits the 1857 uprising in Delhi from a subaltern perspective, attending less to the strategic decisions of sepoy commanders and Mughal court factions than to the textures of ordinary urban life that the rebellion swept up and reshaped. Existing scholarship has mapped the political and military contours of the revolt with depth, but the everyday city — its water carriers, weavers, shopkeepers, sweepers, and small moneylenders — surfaces only at the edges of that narrative. Drawing on the Delhi Mutiny Papers (Farooqui, 2010), Zahir Dehlvi's *Dastan-e-Ghadar* (Safvi, 2017), Mirza Ghalib's correspondence (Russell & Islam, 1969), and the diary of Munshi Jiwan Lal, the study reads these sources against the grain to recover dispersed traces of subaltern presence. It argues that the rebel city ran on networks of labour, communication, and credit furnished by Delhi's poorer residents, and that the British reprisal targeted this population as such. The paper thus reframes 1857 in Delhi as a lived social crisis rather than only a political event.

Keywords: *1857 uprising; Delhi; subaltern history; folk memory; popular participation; ahl-e-Dilli.*

1. Introduction

More than a century and a half after 1857, the question of what happened in Delhi during those months remains, in some sense, unfinished. The military chronology is well attested. The sepoys of Meerut crossed the Yamuna on 11 May, the elderly Bahadur Shah Zafar was prevailed upon to lend his name to a movement he barely commanded, the city held out through a long summer, and the British retook it in mid-September with a violence that shocked even some of its own architects (Dalrymple, 2006; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). What is far less settled is how that political-military spine connects to the lives of the people who happened to live in Delhi when their world was being rewritten around them.

The historiography has moved a long way from the colonial framing of a sepoy mutiny and from early nationalist counter-claims of a coherent first war of independence (Majumdar, 1957; Chandra, 1987). Subsequent work has shown that the uprising was a heterogeneous social phenomenon involving peasants, talukdars, displaced rulers, and labouring poor across northern India (Stokes, 1986; Mukherjee, 1984). The subaltern studies project pushed this further, asking how peasants and workers acted as historical subjects in their own right rather than as the rank and file of someone else's drama (Guha, 1983; Bhadra, 1985). Yet, despite this analytical shift, the urban dimension of 1857, and Delhi in particular, has often been narrated through its elites. The figures who carry the story tend to be Bahadur Shah Zafar, Bakht Khan, Theophilus Metcalfe, John Nicholson, or the literary giants whose work is now treated as the city's voice — Ghalib above all (Russell & Islam, 1969). The bhishti who supplied water to a besieged neighbourhood, the julaha whose loom fell silent when Chandni Chowk shut, the Dalit woman named in a hanging order: these figures are present in the record only as flickers.

Existing studies fall short of an ideal urban historiography in different ways. Gupta's (1981) account of Delhi remains indispensable but is primarily institutional; Stokes (1986) and Mukherjee (1984) work brilliantly with the rural subaltern but largely outside Delhi; Bhadra's (1985) recovery of four obscure rebels shows the method works, but he is not concerned with the capital. The consequences of leaving Delhi's everyday actors out of the story are not only academic. When the uprising is remembered as the affair of an old emperor and a few commanders, it becomes easier to treat the catastrophic British reprisals as collateral damage rather than as the deliberate punishment of a population (Gupta, 1981).

This paper has three objectives: to draw together mediated sources and read them against the grain for traces of subaltern presence; to argue that those traces, though fragmentary, cohere into a picture of an urban economy that was both precondition and casualty of the revolt; and to reflect on writing history from such fragments. Section 2 surveys the historiography, Section 3 sets out the sources and method, Section 4 reconstructs Delhi as a lived environment, Section 5 brings forward subaltern actors, and Section 6 discusses implications and limits before a short conclusion.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Writing on 1857 has passed through three overlapping moments. The first, contemporaneous with the events, was dominated by British military and administrative writers who framed the revolt as a mutiny of soldiers infected by religious panic and aristocratic intrigue (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). The second,

beginning with Savarkar in 1909 and consolidated by Majumdar (1957) and Chandra (1987), reread the events as a national or proto-national struggle. The third, and the one within which this paper sits, was opened by social historians from the 1970s onwards who shifted attention to the rural and urban poor (Stokes, 1986; Mukherjee, 1984; Guha, 1983).

Within that third moment, the Subaltern Studies collective developed a sustained methodological intervention. Guha (1983) argued that Indian historiography had been split between a colonial elitism and a nationalist elitism, and that both had effaced the autonomous political consciousness of the rural poor. The point was not to invent a heroic peasant in place of a heroic prince but to insist that resistance had its own grammar — its codes of solidarity, rumour, sacralisation of leaders, and violence against symbolic targets — that needed to be read on its own terms. Bhadra (1985) applied this perspective directly to 1857, recovering minor figures whose participation had previously been treated as anecdotal. His insistence, after Marx, that history is made by real, living human beings is more than rhetoric; it is an instruction to look at the level at which most action actually occurs.

Amin (1995) extended this work in a particular direction. His study of Chauri Chaura argued that an event lives a second life in popular memory, and that the historian who takes only the official record is missing half the source base. For 1857 in Delhi, where the official record is itself a document of repression, this is critical. Folk memory, family stories, and surviving genealogies of artisan communities are themselves a register in which the revolt was experienced and transmitted. Pandey (2001), writing on Partition, makes a similar point about the productive instability of such sources. The most uncomfortable challenge to the whole project comes from Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" Her worry is not that subaltern actors are silent but that the act of representing them is structurally entangled with the systems that silenced them. To recover a Dalit woman hanged in Chandni Chowk in 1857 by reading the colonial sentencing register is to encounter her only through the violence that ended her. Chakrabarty (2000) and Chatterjee (1986) reinforce this caution: the very categories through which we approach colonial events — nation, people, class — are products of the moment we are trying to study.

Set against this backdrop, the existing literature on Delhi in 1857 is rich but selective. Gupta (1981) tracks the demographic and administrative remaking of the city after 1857 with great precision. Farooqui's (2010) translation of the Delhi Mutiny Papers opened up the rebel administration's own paperwork. Dalrymple (2006) brought a wide readership to the rebel city, though his narrative gravity is the court. Safvi's (2017) translation of Dehlvi made the literary witness accessible. Vir Singh's (2002) edited volume and Narayan's

(2006) work on Dalit assertion have begun to populate the city with named subaltern participants. What is missing is a sustained attempt to bring these strands together for Delhi, and that is the gap this paper occupies.

3. Sources and Methodology

Because this is a work of historical interpretation rather than empirical social science, the conventional tools of statistical inference do not apply. What matters instead is that the source base be transparent, the reading strategy explicit, and the limits of inference honestly marked. The primary archival source is the Delhi Mutiny Papers held at the National Archives of India, accessible through Farooqui's (2010) curated translation. These consist of intelligence summaries, petitions, complaints, and orders issued in the name of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Although produced inside the rebel city, the papers are not free of the limits of any administrative archive: they over-represent matters that came to the attention of officials and under-represent everything settled, suffered, or solved without writing.

Three contemporary literary witnesses sit alongside this archive. Dehlvi's *Dastan-e-Ghadar* (Safvi, 2017) is the memoir of a young Mughal courtier whose attention repeatedly turns to the streets and the displaced. Ghalib's *Dastambu* (Faruqi, 1970) and his collected *Letters* (Russell & Islam, 1969) provide a near-daily textual record of urban collapse. Munshi Jiwan Lal's diary offers the perspective of an Indian functionary who moved between rebel city and British camp.

Three reading practices structure the analysis. The first is reading against the grain — examining sources for what their language, omissions, and incidental detail reveal beyond authorial intent (Guha, 1983). When the rebel court issues an order about water carriers, it confirms not only a problem with water supply but the indispensability, to the besieged city, of an occupational group elite memoirs barely name. The second is triangulation: where a name or pattern appears in more than one source, it is treated as relatively secure; where it appears only once, the inference is hedged. The third is the cautious use of folk memory in the spirit of Amin (1995), as supplementary evidence rather than fact equivalent to documentary record. The major limit of the method is that virtually every source is mediated, and women's voices are particularly under-represented; where these limits affect specific claims, the text says so.

4. Delhi in 1857: Urban Crisis and Lived Experience

The uprising did not arrive in Delhi as a single event with a date and a verdict. It accumulated. From the morning of 11 May, when the Meerut sepoys crossed into the city, through the long siege weeks of July and August, the British counter-attack of September, and the months of reprisal that followed, the texture of daily life changed several times over. Reading the contemporary witnesses in chronological order is the closest one can come to feeling that accumulation.

Mirza Ghalib, writing from his house in Ballimaran, produced what may be the densest literary record of urban breakdown in nineteenth-century South Asia (Russell & Islam, 1969). In a verse-letter to his brother-in-law, he wrote lines that have circulated as a refrain in almost every popular account of 1857 since:

*Chowk jisko kaheñ wo maqtal hai,
Ghar banā hai namūna zindān kā;
Shehr-e Dehli ka zarra zarra khāk,
Tishna-e khoon hai har musalmān kā.*

Read closely, the verse describes the dissolution of the categories through which urban life had been organised. The chowk — the public square of every North Indian city, a place of commerce, news, and casual encounter — has become a maqtal, an execution ground. The ghar, the household, has become a zindan, a prison. The contrast holds, painfully, only because the original meanings of those spaces were so settled. Ghalib's other letters supply small details the verse cannot accommodate: the cousin not heard from, the servant who has not returned, the rumour that bodies are left in the streets because no one dares retrieve them (Russell & Islam, 1969).

Dehlvi's Dastan-e-Ghadar covers the same ground from a different angle. As a young man attached to the Mughal court, he moves between the palace and the city, registering the way that proximity to power did not, in 1857, protect anyone. His description of the city after the recapture is among the most cited passages in the literature of 1857: the city ruined, its people scattered, no peace, no rest, fear in every direction (Safvi, 2017). What gives the line its force is that the categories Dehlvi uses — aman, sukoon, khauf — are not the vocabulary of military analysis. They are the vocabulary in which an ordinary inhabitant of nineteenth-century Delhi would describe the difference between a normal and an abnormal day.

Munshi Jiwan Lal's diary is the most useful single source for the city's economic life under siege. The bazaars closing, the chains of livelihood snapping, the daily preoccupation he glosses as *rozi* — literally daily bread, but understood as the whole machinery by which a working family stayed alive — appear repeatedly. The condition presupposes the existence of an enormous urban working population whose food security was the first casualty of the conflict, long before the September assault.

Placed alongside the Delhi Mutiny Papers, a clearer picture emerges. The rebel administration was, despite its grand symbolic claim, dealing day after day with mundane crises. Petitions about overcharging by grain merchants, complaints about looting sepoys, requests for protection by women whose male relatives had fled, and orders to keep *bhishtis* at work in specific neighbourhoods fill the surviving paperwork (Farooqui, 2010). The post-recapture period was qualitatively worse: a programme of collective reprisal that targeted the city's Muslim population in particular and emptied entire neighbourhoods, with the prize agency systematically stripping houses of their contents (Gupta, 1981).

5. Voices of the People: Subaltern Participation

A walled city of perhaps 150,000 people, cut off for four months from its normal trade hinterland, depended on a small set of occupational groups for survival. Water was carried by *bhishtis*, drawing from the Yamuna and the city's wells. Bread depended on bakers, who depended on grain merchants, who depended on convoys from outside the walls. Cloth came from *julahas* (weavers) concentrated in particular *mohallas*. Communication ran on *harkarahs* (messengers) whose ability to slip past pickets was a kind of expertise the archive rarely names. The credit system that allowed shopkeepers to keep selling when no one had cash was sustained by *sahukars*, sometimes coerced into rebel loans and sometimes extending them voluntarily (Farooqui, 2010; Gupta, 1981).

Where the Delhi Mutiny Papers preserve named individuals from these groups, the names are usually attached to a complaint or order. A *bhishti* called Nathu is referenced in disputes over water distribution during the siege — a small thing, except that the dispute presupposes a working system, and the working system presupposes Nathu and people like him. A weaver named Karim Bux appears in petitions about the collapse of the cloth trade once Chandni Chowk shut. A petty shopkeeper, Beni Prasad, is recorded among those whose premises were looted in mid-September (Farooqui, 2010). None is the subject of his own narrative; each is glimpsed because someone else's complaint required him to be named. These traces matter because they index an entire economy. When the British administration, after September, expelled

the city's Muslim population and sealed off large parts of the walled city, it was severing a working economy that had run on the labour of these named and many more unnamed people (Gupta, 1981).

The colonial sentencing record generated a paper trail of thousands of names. Its character must be stated plainly: it is a sentencing record, not a participation record. People appear in it because someone identified them as a participant in order to punish them. With that caveat, the register is one of the few places where the names of Delhi's poorer residents survive at all. Among those whose names recur are Aman Kahar (palanquin bearer), Ganeshi Mehtar (sweeper), Manora Bhangi (sanitation worker), Hamira Nai (barber), Matadin Teli (oil-presser), and Isari Chamar (leather worker) (Singh, 2002). The simultaneous appearance of names from across the caste and occupational hierarchy is itself analytically significant: the British counter-revolution was indiscriminate in a way that the rebel administration sometimes was not.

The presence of women in this register, though numerically small, is particularly important. Names such as Mani of Palwal, Ratna of Nagli, and Ganno of Delhi appear in connection with charges of participation, harbouring, or refusal to inform (Narayan, 2006). The surviving documentation is shaped by male prosecutors and male witnesses, and the women's own accounts have not survived. To name them here is not to claim we know what they thought; it is to refuse to let the silence of the record become a silence of the historiography.

6. Discussion

Three implications follow from the recovery attempted above. The first concerns the basic shape of the story we tell about 1857 in Delhi. If the labouring poor are added back into the narrative — not as a chorus but as the precondition for the rebel administration's ability to function at all — then the four months between May and September look less like a doomed dynastic romance and more like an administrative crisis at the level of water, food, and credit. This relocates the question of why the rebel city failed. The standard answer, that it was outgunned, is true but partial. A complementary answer, suggested by the sources read here, is that the rebel administration could not stabilise the everyday economy of the city it claimed to govern, and that this failure was not separable from its political fate (Farooqui, 2010; Gupta, 1981).

The second implication concerns the post-recapture period. When the British reprisal is read primarily as a punishment of soldiers and rebel officials, its scale is hard to make sense of. The expulsion of the Muslim population, the dynamiting of structures, the prize-agency stripping of property, and the indiscriminate

sentencing make sense only when the city's ordinary residents are understood to have been targets in their own right. The list of named subalterns in Section 5 — sweepers, barbers, oil-pressers, leather workers, and women — is, in this sense, evidence about the British state as much as about the rebels (Gupta, 1981; Narayan, 2006).

The third implication is methodological. The reading practice followed here — combining literary witnesses, administrative archives, the colonial sentencing register, and folk memory — is the practice the subaltern studies tradition has been developing for decades (Guha, 1983; Bhadra, 1985; Amin, 1995). What this paper contributes is a localised application: even in the apparently well-trodden case of the Delhi uprising, the subaltern archive can be expanded if sources are read with patience and suspicion.

Three limits should be stated. First, the sources are weighted towards the literate and the named, and even named subalterns are visible mainly because they entered the colonial sentencing record. Second, folk memory has been used cautiously, and richer ethnographic engagement with surviving communities in old Delhi would yield more. Third, gender remains under-recovered: the women named here appear largely through male-authored documents, and a sustained study of women's participation in the urban revolt would require a different and more patient archival strategy (Spivak, 1988; Narayan, 2006).

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to read the 1857 uprising in Delhi from a vantage point closer to the street than to the throne. It argued that the standard historiography, for all its strengths, has tended to treat the labouring city as background, and that the result is both an analytically incomplete account of the rebel administration and an ethically incomplete account of what was done to Delhi after September 1857.

By drawing together the literary witnesses of Ghalib (Russell & Islam, 1969), Dehlvi (Safvi, 2017), and Jiwan Lal, the administrative paperwork preserved in the Delhi Mutiny Papers (Farooqui, 2010), the names recoverable from the colonial sentencing register (Singh, 2002; Narayan, 2006), and the residue of folk memory (Amin, 1995), the paper has tried to recover, in fragments, the experience of the city's ordinary residents. The findings reinforce three claims: that the rebel city ran on the labour, credit, and communication networks of subaltern Delhi; that the British reprisal targeted this population as such; and that the methodological combination used here can substantially expand what we know about the urban dimension of 1857.

The story of azadi is always partial. The voices of the ahl-e-Dilli reach us, when they reach us, faintly and indirectly. That they reach us at all, more than a century and a half later, is itself a kind of resistance.

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