



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

## The Mutiny to Come

Faisal Devji

New Literary History, Volume 40, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp.  
411-430 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/nlh.0.0089



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nlh/summary/v040/40.2.devji.html>

## The Mutiny to Come

Faisal Devji

**I**N THE SPRING OF 1857, some of the East India Company's troops in Barrackpore and Berhampore began refusing to follow orders. Rising against the English in Meerut soon after, these soldiers marched to Delhi, where they placed the powerless Mughal emperor, himself a pensioner of the company, at their head. Spreading across a large portion of northern India, including the cities of Cawnpore and Lucknow, the revolt was eventually put down by men loyal to the British and, by the end of 1858, had been completely stamped out. Apart from constituting the greatest anticolonial rebellion of the nineteenth century, to which Karl Marx, for instance, devoted several substantial essays that compared it to the French Revolution, the Indian Mutiny was immediately recognized as a war unprecedented in its brutality, involving as it did massacres of civilians on both sides and the large-scale destruction of their habitations. And though the mutiny's casualties were not comparable to those of the roughly contemporaneous Crimean War or the Civil War in America, it remained the most important site of cruelty, horror, and bloodshed for both Englishmen and Indians at least until the First World War. Indeed, for Victorian writers, the revolt represented the previously unknown depths to which human beings, whether English or Indian, could sink in the savagery of their passions.<sup>1</sup>

While colonial accounts of the mutiny, in other words, tended to emphasize its links to and precedents in India's barbarous past, they were also quick to acknowledge the event's utter novelty, not least because of the monstrosity it inspired among the English themselves. In this way, the revolt seemed to give the lie to Victorian notions of moral progress by opening up an abyss within human nature itself. For Marx, of course, the rebellion represented a struggle against capitalism's inhumanity, and he saw it as the closest thing to a revolution on the Asian continent. But, in fact, the Indian Mutiny might better be seen as one of the world's first modern wars in its mobilization and targeting of civilians as much as their places of work, residence, and recreation, all in violation of moral and legal norms in their British as well as Indian incarnations. For the violence of modern warfare, let us remember, derives from the

relatively unregulated character of colonial and civil wars more than it does from the rule-bound conflicts of European dynasties, which have provided us with the laws of war that we flout on every modern battlefield.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in English writing what we might call the mutiny's modernity continued to be juxtaposed with the elements that it drew from Indian tradition.

Contemporary Indian writers were more likely to see the rebellion as an unprecedented, and in this sense thoroughly modern event, though they identified as new or strange the very beliefs and practices that for colonial authors signalled the pull of tradition. There was, for instance, the rumor that newly issued bullet cartridges, which the company's soldiers were meant to bite open, were greased with the fat of cows and pigs to defile Hindus and Muslims. Then there was the anonymous circulation of chapattis, the unleavened bread that is a staple across northern India, which served as omens of an impending attack on the religious obligations of Indians, the breaking of whose dietary taboos would make them into undifferentiated slaves of the English. Together with more recognizably "political" claims about the company's intentions of conquering the remaining Indian kingdoms and reducing their inhabitants to servitude, these fears of being converted to Christianity should have been familiar to Indian writers of the time. But what interested them was the way in which such charges had been transformed in the rebellion, seen as an event unknown to previous history. So it is not surprising that Indian writers quickly identified the mutiny with the kind of historical break that characterized modernity in its European sense.

Arguments about the mutiny's modernity, of course, have for a long time now been retailed by Indian and Pakistani nationalists who view the revolt as in some way a precursor of their respective independence movements. But this is a thesis that derives no clear support from Indian documents of the period, instead finding its origins in British texts on the revolt, for instance in the lengthy summation by the judge advocate at the trial of the Mughal emperor, known to his prosecutors as the ex-King of Delhi. Referring to the rebellious troops of the East India Company, this gentleman averred that it was British rule that had created among them the potential for unity and even of a European form of nationality: "Brahman and Mussulman here met as it were upon neutral ground; they have had, in the army, one common brotherhood of profession, the same dress, the same rewards, the same objects to be arrived at the same means. They frequently joined each other in their separate festivals, and the union encouraged by the favor of the Government was finally resorted to as a measure to subvert it."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the merits of this oft-repeated argument, in which we might recognize the origins of nationalism in the subcontinent, it finds some

confirmation in contemporary Indian accounts of the mutiny like that of the famous Muslim reformer Sayyid Ahmad Khan.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, most Indian accounts of the rebellion are full of statements about its novelty, with the events of 1857 made comparable only with the most distant and momentous of precedents, ranging from the Arab conquest of Persia to the *Reconquista* in Spain.<sup>5</sup> But what interests me here are not the historical analogies drawn by commentators of the time so much as the issues that gave the revolt its language: cartridges, chapattis, conversion, and the king who was meant to save his subjects from all three. Of course, these are the very elements that for colonial and nationalist writers tie the Indian Mutiny back to tradition and the past.

With their highly pluralistic rhetoric about preserving religious distinctions and their fear of the uniformity resulting from conversion to Christianity, the rebels can be said to represent the struggle of an empire against a nation rather than the reverse. Even so hostile a writer as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who published the first Indian account of the Mutiny in 1859, recognized the rebels' fear of such unity when he described, for example, the letters sent out by an English missionary in 1855 arguing for a single religion in a country that had been unified under a single government by means of the telegraph, railways, and roads.<sup>6</sup> However, it will be my contention that this empire of the imagination that was the mutiny's ideal belonged not to the subcontinent's past but its future, informing political movements there into our own times. To reveal the outlines of this new empire, I shall focus on four kinds of documents from the revolt's vast archive: trial transcripts from the mutiny's opening salvos in Barrackpore and its closing scenes in Delhi, some texts of rebel proclamations throughout this period, and a few contemporary accounts of these events by Indian writers.

### Biting the Bullet

The correspondence and court transcripts from the mutiny's beginnings in Barrackpore and Berhampore all put into question the sepoys' belief in rumors concerning the new cartridges they were meant to bite open, as well as their responsibility in fomenting rebellion within the Bengal Army. Even taking into account any British inclination to blame dark forces beyond their army for the revolt, these documents are unambiguous in pointing out the skepticism of many soldiers regarding the cartridge rumors. Thus Lieutenant and Brevet-Captain J. A. Wright, commanding the Rifle Instruction Depot, wrote to the depot adjutant at Dum Dum on January 22:

Some of the depot men, in conversing with me on the subject last night, said that the report has spread throughout India, and when they go to their homes their friends will refuse to eat with them. I assured them (believing it to be the case) that the grease used is composed of mutton fat and wax; to which they replied—"It may be so, but our friends will not believe it; let us obtain the ingredients from the bazar and make it up ourselves; we shall then know what is used, and be able to assure our fellow soldiers and others that there is nothing in it prohibited by our caste."<sup>7</sup>

This is only one of a number of accounts of Indian soldiers respectfully asking their English superiors to permit them to grease the cartridges with ingredients of their own choice. And while each such request attributes belief in rumors of pollution to the soldiers' friends and family, the sepoy often went to the length of testing the cartridges themselves to see if they contained animal fat—though they seem not to have objected to the use of mutton and other grease. Here is a fairly typical example from the testimony of Havildar-Major Ajoodiah Singh, from the Eighth Company of the Second Regiment Native (Grenadier) Infantry, at a special court of inquiry held at Barrackpore on February 6:

Question: Have you any objection to the use of the cartridges lying on the table?

Answer: I have suspicions about the paper on account of the bazar report that there is grease in it.

Question: Have you taken any measures to prove whether this report is true?

Answer: I have tried it in oil and also in water. And where it was wet with the oil it would not dissolve; after this trial I thought there was no grease in it.

Question: By the experiment, in your opinion, there was no grease in the paper; would you object to bite off the end of the cartridge?

Answer: I could not do it, as the other men would object to it.<sup>8</sup>

Pursuing the "bazaar rumour" that seemed to have struck their army with the fear of being ostracized by its own countrymen, British officers were quick to blame outside agents for it, including the recently deposed King of Oudh, but more especially Brahmin and Hindu organizations in Calcutta that were angered by the company's legalization of widow remarriage and proscription of sati or widow burning.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the courts of inquiry convened during the initial stages of the mutiny determined that it was the Hindu soldiers alone who were disloyal and untrustworthy, with Muslims and Sikhs being judged responsible and

reliable.<sup>10</sup> And this despite the fact that the rumors of greased cartridges spoke from the very beginning of their contamination by cow and pig fat to pollute Hindus and Muslims both. So, at the trial of the ex-king of Delhi in 1858, Captain Martineau of the Tenth Native Infantry only echoed the general opinion when he dismissed Muslim concern with the contamination of cartridges:

Question: Did you observe any difference in making complaints about forcible deprivation of their religion between the Hindu and the Mussulmans?

Answer: Yes, as far as the cartridge question went the Mahommedan sepoy laughed at it; it was only the Hindus that made the complaints in reference to losing caste; but in regard to those who spoke of the annexation of Oudh as a grievance, I can't say whether they were Mahommedans or not. (*TB* 84)

The judge advocate at the king's trial relied upon such testimony to dismiss the earlier judgement of his colleagues in Barrackpore and argue that the mutiny had been a Muslim plot, with its Hindu supporters serving merely as tools in the hands of Bahadur Shah and his accomplices. What interests me in all this, however, is the fact that neither Hindu nor Muslim soldiers appeared to have believed in the cartridge rumors, claiming rather that they were protesting on behalf of others, anonymous Indians whose opinion put the sepoy, their friends, and families at risk of ostracism. Whether or not this anonymous and possibly nonexistent host may be seen as a nation in waiting, important about the mutineers' rhetoric was its disavowal of any personal belief for the obligation owed others. In other words, there was no presumption of any shared faith in such rhetoric, only the duty subsisting between these soldiers and their kith and kin.

Notwithstanding the absence of individual or collective faith in mutinous rhetoric among many of the sepoy, this lack being compensated for by a sense of individual and collective obligation, striking about the early days of the revolt were the soldiers' respectful requests of their superiors, together with principled refusals to follow their orders. We have to wait more than sixty years to see similar forms of moral protest in India, this time under the name of Gandhian noncooperation. This reference to the Mahatma is not a throwaway one, as throughout the course of their revolt we find the sepoy asking Indians in general, rather than those belonging to the same caste or locality, to refuse to work for the British, thus creating the only historical precedent we have for Gandhi's practice of "truth-force" or *satyagraha*.<sup>11</sup> The following rebel proclamation even goes so far as to discount a military victory over the British and recommend instead noncooperation of an entirely civilian kind:

“Consider yourselves dead even before death.” This alone can save you. Otherwise you will be bought over by their allurements and then put to death. There will be no chance of escape; all will have cause to repent, and will bite their fingers with their teeth when repentance will be of no avail. If you think they have no army, that their hopes are gone and their ambitions frustrated, such an idea is delusive. Consider what an army they have between Cawnpore and Calcutta. They are on friendly terms with all the European powers—these in the hour of misfortune readily help each other. If you too are all united and refuse to accept appointments of any kind under them, they will be reduced to despair. There is a fable that a woodcutter came to a certain grove of trees and the trees said “Lo! here is our enemy, but we need not fear for he can not harm us.” But when they saw a wooden handle affixed to his axe they said “alas! one of our tribe has joined him, now we may bid farewell to all our liberty.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not they believed in bazaar rumors about cartridges and chapattis, what the mutineers were protesting was the threat that British attempts to unify them posed the moral imagination structuring north Indian society as an empire of distinctions. It was this threat that came to be symbolized by cartridges and chapattis, with Captain Martineau describing the latter at the ex-king’s trial in the following way:

I asked them what they understood in reference to them, and by whom they supposed that they were circulated: they described them to me as being in size and shape like ship biscuits, and believed them to have been distributed by order of Government through the medium of their servants for the purpose of intimating to the people of Hindustan that they should be all compelled to eat the same food: and that was considered as a token, that they would likewise be compelled to embrace one faith, or as they termed it, “One food and one faith.” (*TB* 83)

Without limits and distinctions moral action itself was impossible along with a moral actor who was something more than an abstraction. Thus, rebels accused the English not of keeping aloof from Indians so much as of trying to convert them into their own society. And this vision of a population rendered uniform through conversion suggested to the mutineers only a state of enslavement, though it was clear to them that accepting Christianity would earn them favor. It was in this sense that the mutiny represented an empire of distinctions, one in which differences between rulers and subjects as well as among these subjects were much to be desired because they made morality possible in the form of obligation towards others. Indeed, the mutineers feared not the violation of their religion, as the English translation of the day would have it, but rather of their moral duty, called *dharma* in Sanskrit and *farz* in Arabic. One of the rebel proclamations, issued in the name of Bahadur Shah, even went so far as to quote a verse of the Bhagavad Gita on how it was preferable to die than forsake one’s own duty for that of another (*TB* 102).

The British were therefore accused by the rebels of being indiscriminate not only about the things they ate, but also with respect to their sexual voraciousness and indifference to breaches of promise and trust—the same kinds of accusations that were habitually levelled at low-caste individuals and rivals of all sorts. But while this refusal to draw distinctions and set limits to their behavior might be tolerated among undistinguished persons, it was dangerous in the English because they now ruled India and so were expected to act in a manner that befitted their station. These obligations were important, in other words, because rulers had the power to corrupt their subjects and indeed the state itself by such immoral practices.<sup>13</sup> Now all this might seem very traditional, as indeed it is, until we recall that the mutiny also served as a founding moment for the widespread fears of conversion as well as the disputes over it that exist to this day between Christians, Muslims, and Hindus—to say nothing about Indians themselves adopting such European forms of proselytism in order to breach the obligations they owe their neighbors.

The rebels did not accuse the British of being inherently wicked and, therefore, did not entertain a racial view of them. This lack of concern with the Englishness of their enemies was demonstrated by the fact that the mutineers tended to spare any who claimed to have converted to Islam—conversion to Hinduism being of course impossible. Odd about this fact is that even the most unlikely of such claims, including those by women and children pretending to be Kashmiris, seems to have been accepted as true by a kind of courtesy, as if to prove that it was not conversion the rebels objected to so much as the duplicitous and engineered proselytization feared of the British. And indeed, both Englishmen and Indians at the time discounted any concern with conversion on the part of the sepoys, with Sayyid Ahmad Khan pointing out that while everyone in India was free to preach his religion, Christian missionaries were the only ones to force their often insulting sermons upon others not only in public places like markets, but also at Hindu and Muslim festivals and sites of pilgrimage.<sup>14</sup> This distinction between coerced and hospitable forms of proselytism became a standard one after the mutiny, with Gandhi himself holding to it, and it is a distinction that continues to be invoked today by popular opinion as much as anticonversion legislation in various parts of India and Pakistan.

The English, therefore, do not seem to have been disliked for being foreigners at all, but only for breaking the moral compact that defined India as an empire of distinctions. So Sayyid Ahmad Khan pointed out that his countrymen could have no objection to be ruled by aliens of one sort or another since this had for centuries been the regular state of affairs for most of them,<sup>15</sup> and that, furthermore, Indians were used to flocking to the banner of whichever power promised to become dominant and maintain a moral compact with them.<sup>16</sup> This argument reappears with



Gandhi, who was adamant in making the point that the British were to be fought not as aliens but rather as unfit rulers. Thus, he was willing, at least in his early career, to countenance India's participation in the empire, while being unwilling to accept any definition of independence that would simply replace English faces with Indian ones. Precedents for the Mahatma's vision of imperialism as a moral compact having nothing to do with race are evident in mutineers' texts, such as the following passages from the "Advice of the Royal Army":

It has been handed down by tradition that dominion is retained by one individual, only because it is the gift of God; and that this divine gift only lasts and prospers so long as the holder performs his duties with gratitude and thanksgiving. An instance of the truth of this is the English rule in India; as almighty God has said in the Holy Quran: "Upon whomsoever we confer a bounty, we do not wrest from him until he alters his habits." . . . There were three causes which contributed to the success of the British rule in India.

1. They were true to their promises and engagements
2. They did much service by the construction of roads and earned the gratitude of travellers by ensuring their safety.
3. In administering justice they showed no partiality to members of their own tribe.<sup>17</sup>

Misgovernment, oppression, breaking of treaties, evil intentions, bigotry, bitter animosity towards natives of India, pride, blasphemous arrogance—a single one of these bad qualities would suffice for the subversion of an empire—but as it happens all of them are concentrated in the English character.<sup>18</sup>

In the absence of a racial or even dynastic conception of rule, a moral compact provided the only framework within which to judge misrule, which is perhaps why acts of English perfidy like the annexation of Oudh were seen by many of the mutineers not as causes for revolt in any patriotic let alone religious sense but merely as examples of British bad faith. Thus, witnesses at the ex-king's trial insisted that the sepoys had little interest in or loyalty to the king and territory Oudh. And Ahsanullah Khan, the ex-king's physician, not only claimed that the Sunnis of Delhi regarded Oudh's annexation as divine punishment for its Shiite ruler's persecution of their fellow sectarians (*TB* 187–88), but also that the mutinous soldiers saw the event as an example of treachery without being particularly enraged by the annexation: "The sepoys who were at Delhi never complained particularly against the annexation of Oudh. But they certainly used to say that the British would take possession of every province as they had occupied Oudh; and that they took possession of that country even though the King did not fight against them" (*TB* 188).

Here and there the imperial theory of rule represented by a moral compact was modernized in mutineer rhetoric by the recognition of contemporary realities both political and economic. Thus, the strained British relations with Russia, Persia, and Afghanistan provided the basis for expectations of military support from these quarters. More interesting, however, was the rebels' recognition that the company's economic power differed from and indeed rivalled the political authority represented by Queen Victoria, who is described in the following excerpt from a mutinous pamphlet both as an example of English immorality, and as a fellow victim of the East India Company driven into the hands of Britain's traditional enemy France by the hand of her foreign husband:

It so happened that the Emperor of the French sent a message to the Queen by her husband and this secret having transpired, the English had a council at which it was unanimously determined that her husband was never to be admitted to her presence in future unless four men were present on the occasion, as a last resort and in order to quench the fire of lust, the Queen has now selected an Ethiopian boy who is anxious to carry her off to Africa. Victoria has all but yielded to the proposition as she cannot bear to be separated from him and it is confidently expected that in the end she will become a fakir and abdicate the throne. The Company is desirous of wresting the Kingdom from Victoria in the same way as they wrested the Kingdom of Oude from its sovereign.<sup>19</sup>

However garbled it might appear in their pronouncements, the mutineers appear to have possessed a firm enough grasp of contemporary reality to belie any assertion that they were simply traditional rebels. The mutiny's novelty, however, should not be represented in standard colonial or nationalist fashion, merely by identifying the undeniable Europeanization of its soldiers in the matter of training, organization, or even consciousness. It is another kind of future that this momentous event inaugurates, one that is discernible in the supposedly old-fashioned relations it created between Hindus and Muslims, on the one hand, and between subjects and king, on the other.

### Tweddledum and Tweedledee

The earliest rumors about greased cartridges are said to have emanated from a low-caste military employee at Barrackpore who asked a Brahmin soldier for water and, upon being refused it, disclosed that the British were planning to destroy the caste of both Hindus and Muslims. Here is one account of the rumor as reported by Major General J. B. Hearsey, commanding the Presidency Division, to Colonel R. J. H. Birch, Secretary to the Government of India in the Military Department, dated February 11, 1857:

A sepoy from one of the regiments here was walking to his *chowka* [compound] to prepare his food, with his *lota* [vessel], full of water. He was met by a low-caste *khalasi* [laborer] (it is said to be one of the magazine or arsenal men). This *khalasi* asked him to let him drink from the *lota*. The sepoy, a Brahmin, refused saying—"I have scoured my *lota*; you will defile it by your touch." The *khalasi* rejoined—"you think much of your caste, but wait a little, the *saheb-logue* [British] will make you bite cartridges soaked in cow and pork fat, and then where will your caste be?"<sup>20</sup>

Let us note a couple of peculiarities in this account: for one thing, a Brahmin would have had no religious objection in pouring out some water for any low-caste or indeed Muslim individual to drink—only to handing either one the drinking vessel. And for another, Muslims would not have had any religious objection in handing a drinking vessel to such a person. In other words, the symmetry set up in this account and all others like it between Hindus and Muslims is a false one both theoretically and historically. We have already seen how Muslim sepoys laughed at the idea of being polluted by the cartridges. Thus Sayyid Ahmad Khan points out that had Hindus and Muslims not been put together in the same units, the latter would very likely have had no objection in biting the cartridges.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he traced this habit of dutiful solidarity with one's neighbor to earlier protests against the provision of food in jails, where cooks of lower caste ended up polluting many Hindu prisoners and, in doing so, hurting their Muslim neighbors though they had no religious objection to such food themselves.<sup>22</sup>

As for the caste hierarchy whose subversion this rumor of polluted food announces, we hear nothing more about it in mutiny documents. The low-caste herald of British perfidy appears in the story only to set up a symmetrical relationship between high-caste Hindus and wellborn Muslims, promptly to disappear after serving his role as the outsider from whose point of view alone could these groups appear comparable. This suggests that the rebels were occupied in their rhetoric with conceiving of an entirely new kind of Hindu-Muslim relationship, one that depended on the myth of symmetry between the two. Now this kind of symmetry had been invoked by mystics and poets in the past, but only to be condemned, since it was understood as representing the similarity between equally bigoted men of religion. It was the *brahmin* and the *shaykh*, therefore, rather than Hindus and Muslims, who had previously been so compared. Even when viewed favorably, this religious similarity was seen merely as the sign of a deeper and truer unity, generally embodied by a mystical figure standing outside the bounds of religious doctrine. Instead of following the mystic script and abandoning such symmetry for a deeper unity, however, rebel rhetoric actually dispensed with the saintly figure positioned outside this relationship, whose place

was now occupied by low-caste individuals and Englishmen. Or to put it in other words, the mystical union of religions was ignored to establish moral and political relations between them.

Though mutineer texts urge Hindus and Muslims to unite in fighting the common threat that the British posed, it is clear that they were by no means meant to fight as one people. On the contrary, rebel rhetoric seems obsessed by working out a new relationship between Hindus and Muslims in which each is meant to sacrifice their own interest for the other's religious scruples without sharing these in any way—thus relating to one another in the same way as we have seen the sepoys related to their friends and families. Instead of being related to one another by loyalty to the king, as had been the case with religious and ethnic groups in times past, Hindus and Muslims had now to create a new model of interaction, one which found its origin in the rebel army. Here is a passage elaborating this new relationship from a proclamation attributed to Bahadur Shah, the first part recounting an English plot to destroy the caste duty of Hindus and the second proposing a moral compact between these latter and the Muslims:

They accordingly now ordered the Brahmans and others of their army to bite cartridges in the making up of which fat had been used. The Mussulman soldiers perceived that by this expedient the religion of the Brahmans and Hindus only was in danger, but nevertheless they also refused to bite them. . . . The slaughter of kine is regarded by the Hindus as a great insult to their religion. To prevent this, a solemn compact or agreement has been entered into by all the Mahommedan chiefs of Hindustan, binding themselves that if the Hindus will come forward to slay the English, the Mahommedans will from that very day put a stop to the slaughter of cows, and those of them who will not do so, will be considered to have abjured the Kuran, and such of them as will eat beef will be regarded as though they had eaten pork: but if the Hindus will not gird their loins to kill the English, but will try to save them, they will be as guilty in the sight of God as though they had committed the sins of killing cows and eating flesh. (*TB* 103)

Again, we see the attempt to create relations of symmetry between the adherents of India's two dominant religions. Such efforts possessed a long history in Mughal India but were transformed by the revolt into a pact of mutual sacrifice and defence for the first time. While the passage above appears to suggest that Hindus needed to be cajoled into rebellion by Muslims, which was exactly the conclusion drawn by the judge advocate in the ex-king of Delhi's trial, we know that the majority of mutinous sepoys were in fact Hindus. This proclamation, then, might indicate that some Muslims at least had come to recognize the necessity of Hindu support in any movement to topple and replace the British. The anxiety

produced by such a recognition is evident in this and other Muslim offers to come to a religious understanding with their Hindu neighbors since these would-be pacts are sometimes followed by acknowledgements that the English might themselves come to similar arrangements with Hindus and leave Muslims out in the cold (*TB* 104).

Muslim offers of a religious pact in which they promised to abjure cow slaughter, and the anxious recognition that Hindu support was required to achieve Islam's freedom in India, both resurfaced in the aftermath of the First World War. Many Indian Muslims then feared for the titles and territories of the defeated Ottomans, whose sultan also claimed to be the caliph or spiritual head of Sunni Islam. The agitation these men began against the Allied partition of Ottoman lands was joined by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi's inspiration, and it was to the Mahatma that Muslim divines made their offers of a compact, only to be met with a firm refusal of any deal. Like a number of his predecessors during the mutiny, Gandhi made it clear that such an alliance was not a worldly and therefore temporary contract, but instead a relationship made up of sacrifices offered by one party in defence of another's religious prejudices. So he approved the apparently irrational cause of the caliphate because, separated from any politics of rational interest, it demonstrated the purely religious or idealistic motives of India's Muslims and could therefore form the basis of an equally disinterested relationship with their Hindu neighbors. For whatever the truth of the matter, the Mahatma realised that a nation could not come into being by a calculus of interests but only by way of a mobilization that was truly idealistic in character.<sup>23</sup>

Even as it was happening, the Khilafat agitation was routinely compared to the mutiny, not only due to the new religious relations it had created, but also because it was the only event to pose a comparable threat to the British Empire. Just as Muslim soldiers in 1857 were said to have supported Hindu concerns about ritual pollution without themselves believing in such a thing, so too did Hindus under the Mahatma's leadership support the cause of the caliphate. And if Gandhi's Muslim allies made him into the "dictator" of the Khilafat Movement and forbade cow slaughter even on their feast of sacrifice, they were only following the precedent set by their ancestors during the revolt in Delhi, as reported by one of the city's English survivors, Mrs. Aldwell, at the ex-king's trial:

Question: Had the Mussulmans and Hindus had quarrels or discussions among themselves on the score of religion when they were in Delhi together?

Answer: I think when the troops first came, the Hindus made the King promise that there should be no oxen killed in the city, and this promise was kept. I believe

that not a single ox was killed in Delhi during the whole time of the rebellion. On the festival of the Bakr-Eed, when the Mahommedans usually slaughter an ox, a disturbance was expected; but the Mahommedans refrained from doing so on this occasion. (*TB* 70)

If this arrangement looks very much like a worldly contract, its sacrificial nature was demonstrated in the breakdown of interreligious agreement once the tide started turning against the mutineers. In the words of Mrs. Aldwell, "The Hindu sepoy especially upbraided the Mahommedans, saying: 'This is your first engagement with the English; is this the way you intended to fight for your faith?' They also already spoke in terms of much regret of the turn that affairs had taken, reproached the Mahommedans for having deceived them on pretences of their religion, and seemed to doubt greatly whether the English Government had really had any intention of interfering with their caste" (*TB* 70).

Just like the failure of the mutiny before it, that of the Khilafat Movement in 1921 led to a great deal of acrimony among Hindus and Muslims, each community accusing the other of duplicity as far as its professions of disinterested friendship were concerned. But, in either case, this only confirms the sheer originality of the failed effort to create a new kind of relationship between these adherents of the subcontinent's two major religions. Indians commonly attributed the failure of both these movements to their breaking of the moral compact they were meant to protect. In the case of Khilafat, it was the Mahatma who put a stop to the movement once its supporters started engaging in violence. And in that of the mutiny, ordinary Indians seem to have dissociated themselves from the rebels once their violence departed from moral norms. Of course, these disapproving Indians were not an undifferentiated or disinterested lot, and nationalist historians have made much of the mutineers' supposed betrayal by Hindu and Muslim elites, both aristocrats and merchants, whose power they threatened. Like their colonial predecessors, nationalist writers have also blamed the mutiny's failure upon the rebels' inability to extricate themselves from inherited patterns of hierarchical thinking. Whatever the validity of such arguments, the moral compact that defined the revolt's empire of distinctions is interesting in its own right, not least because it represented no tradition but a new historical departure.

It is true that many among the gentry deplored the rise to power of the mutinous army, one that ruled in its own name and did not follow any royal house or religious authority, despite its forcible adoption of Bahadur Shah as leader. The following passage from a memoir of the revolt in Delhi is typical in its contempt for the radically new social form taken by the soldiers:

An upheaval of newly risen men occurred, and a group of them rose like a plague; a different creation, (men whose) manner was different, whose style differed, whose way was disagreeable . . . and whose signs differed; (men) whose community was new, various sorts of men whose habits were several. To sum up, such (men) were gathered who possessed neither the mark of shame on their foreheads nor the style of loyalty in their human makeup. Where was chivalry? Where courage? If some afflicted one saluted (them), they would move hands as if broken (in returning the greeting), and with contempt furthermore. If some needy one opened the mouth of supplication, they would, like the dumb, not reply, or if they did, villainously. Because of selfishness, most of them do not accept any superior, and by reason of pride most consider themselves better than anyone else.<sup>24</sup>

The rebel army convened its own councils, appointed its own generals, and marched under some version of the motto *khalq-e khuda, mulk-e padishah, hukm-e sipah* [to God belongs creation, to the Emperor his country and command to the soldier]. The sepoys themselves seem to have mistrusted many among their aristocratic allies, of whom there were in fact very few, with none of India's leading princes lending the mutineers their support. This mistrust expressed itself in fears that Mughal courtiers had reached an understanding with the English to betray the rebels, this being the reason why they were protecting the lives of British women and children who had taken refuge in the palace. Despite the remonstrances of the royal physician and at least one prince, these hostages were massacred on May 16, 1857, to the horror of Delhi's citizens. As Chuni Lal, a news writer, reported, "After the slaughter the bodies were laden on two carts, and thrown into the river. This occurrence caused a great excitement amongst the Hindus throughout the city, who said that these Purbeas [easterners] who had committed this heinous and atrocious cruelty could never be victorious against the English" (*TB* 94).

The mutineers, in other words, were castigated for breaking the moral compact they sought to defend, and contemporary writers, wellborn to a man, accused them precisely of this offence. Here is an account of rebel crimes by Bahadur Shah, who had tried without much success to ensure that some semblance of law and order was maintained in Delhi during sepoj rule:

Moreover, without reference to night or day, they enter and plunder the houses of the inhabitants on the false plea that they have concealed Europeans. They force locks and shop-doors and openly carry away the property from the shops, and they forcibly loose the horses of the cavalry and take them off. They commit these excesses in the face of the fact that all cities taken without military operations have ever been exempted from sack and slaughter. Even Jangiz Khan and Nadir Shah, kings execrated as tyrants, gave peace and protection to such cities as surrendered without resistance. (*TB* 126-27)

However well-intended, these desires and efforts to restore stability in rebel territory all seem rather old-fashioned compared with the undeniable modernity of mutineer practices, which included the unheard of publication of collective pronouncements in the name of the army to its brothers and unprecedented calls to mobilize women, children, and the elderly for warfare. Nevertheless, these very proclamations also promised Indians of various classes a restoration of traditional regulations concerning widow burning and remarriage, noble inheritances, and the like.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, they promised the elimination of taxes on large landholders, the waiving of British trade monopolies, stamp fees and customs duties upon merchants, the offer of better salaries and the possibility of advancement to the highest ranks for soldiers and public servants, the proscription of English manufactures and guarantee of employment for artisans at the courts and estates of the aristocracy, and the granting of rent-free lands for pundits and fakirs.<sup>26</sup> This recourse to tradition can be seen as atavistic or opportunistic in its recognition of the complaints that various classes of Indians entertained against British rule, though it might equally herald the origins of *swadeshi*, the nationalist movement in favor of abandoning British manufactures to encourage Indian artisanship that achieved its culmination with Gandhi. In the following section, however, I want to look at how the Mutiny redefined traditional authority altogether—beginning with that of the king.<sup>27</sup>

### Authority without Power

The mutineers might have had good military cause for taking Delhi, and their propping up of Bahadur Shah as emperor may have possessed an equally sound political rationale, but the consequences of his elevation went well beyond such logistical reasoning. While the enthronement of puppet kings was a familiar enough event, with Bahadur Shah having occupied precisely this position from the beginning of his reign, the king's role during the revolt assumed an altogether different countenance. From being a petitioner and pensioner of the East India Company, he suddenly became a figure of moral rather than royal authority. Even before the mutiny, of course, this scion of a long decrepit dynasty had enjoyed a curious authority among India's great princes, each one richer and more powerful than himself. The royal physician Ahsanullah Khan said as much to the court trying his former master. "The King was a personage to wait upon whom all Chiefs, Hindu or Mahomedan, would have considered an honor to themselves" (*TB* 187).

But to attribute this authority to some legitimacy inherited from the heyday of Mughal rule does not tell us much, especially given the well-



known humiliations that the House of Timur had been subjected to by its successive protectors, of whom the British were only the last. It was not therefore the much-tarnished sanctity of Bahadur Shah's dynasty that lent him any superstitious legitimacy, but what we might perhaps call the constitutional position he occupied, one that was augmented by his very powerlessness. Very briefly, I would like to suggest that this position had to do with a declining dynasty's neutrality within India's ethnic, religious, and indeed political landscape. Unlike the Rajputs, Afghans, Sikhs, or Marathas, after all, the Mughals possessed neither regional nor ethnolinguistic partisans among their subjects, their own tribe of Chagatay Turks being too insignificant in number to provide one. Such ties as they had were with groups like the Rajputs among whom the emperors married. Furthermore, the Mughals' adherence to Islam may have legitimized them among Muslims both in India and abroad, constituting therefore a factor in their empire's international if not domestic standing, but it did not provide a foundation for the dynasty itself. For this was traced back to pre-Islamic times and indeed to a Mongol goddess, to say nothing of including heroes like Hulagu Khan who had conquered Muslim Baghdad and killed its last caliph. In this sense, the Mughals were certainly a Muslim dynasty, though in the post-Mongol fashion they recognized no caliph, but they cannot be described as an Islamic one.

It was the House of Timur's constitutional if not political neutrality, then, that I would hazard made it into India's only imperial dynasty, with the Maratha, Persian, Afghan, and Sikh rulers who effectively succeeded the Mughals all acknowledging their peculiar authority, as indeed did the British themselves throughout the eighteenth century. This neutrality had to do with the fact that the dynasty's legitimacy resided in elements like a half-mythical Mongol ancestry that had little if anything to do with India or its various peoples. And yet this Mongol past did not by any means represent some tribal or regional interest within the empire, not only because the Mughals possessed no such basis, but also because the Mongol theory of rule from which they drew acknowledged no such limitation to begin with. Apart from founding history's greatest empire, the Mongols were the first to conceive its potential as world encompassing in nature, this limitless vision finding its pale reflection in the grandiloquent titles of world conqueror, world emperor, and the like used by the Mughals. The House of Timur, in other words, was neutral precisely because it claimed a universality that had nothing to do with region or religion.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, this form of imperial authority, which depended upon distinction rather than sameness, had been put in place by the Mughals themselves in the days of Akbar, but we can see its effects as late as the mutiny. Ahsanullah Khan tells us that Bahadur Shah welcomed news of the rebellion in its early stages because he thought it would bring to power new rulers who would treat him with greater consideration:

I do not remember exactly the month in which intelligence was received of the regiment near Calcutta having refused to receive the new cartridges. I only know that the information was obtained from a Calcutta newspaper; and when it was known that the discussion about the cartridges was spreading, it was remarked that, inasmuch as the matter touched the religion of the people, the excitement would spread extensively over the entire length and breadth of the country, and the native army would desert the British Government, whose rule would then be at an end. The King remarked that he would, in that case, be placed in better circumstances, inasmuch as a new dominant power would treat him with greater respect and consideration. The princes of the royal family used to remark that the native army would go over either to Nepal or Persia. But they had no idea that they would unite themselves with the King, because he had neither money nor troops. (*TB* 180-81)

Not only Bahadur Shah, but many of his subjects, too, expected that India's new rulers, thought to be Persians for the most part, would set him up as titular emperor in this strictly constitutional sense. So a Delhi newspaper, the *Authentic News*, dated March 19, 1857, compares the king to his ancestor Humayun, who had been helped by the Safavid emperor Shah Abbas to regain his throne. "Why would Hindus welcome the King of Persia? Only if he were to place our own King, as Abbas Shah Safi did Humayun—as it was Timur who gave sovereignty to the Persians" (*TB* 116).

Important about this passage is the fact that it has Hindu but not Muslim loyalty to any new power depending upon the enthronement of a Mughal emperor alone, thus demonstrating the dynasty's post-Islamic as well as its neutral character. That the mutineers did not join forces with a strong monarch but rushed to Delhi and put themselves under Bahadur Shah's constitutional authority was something nobody expected, for in doing so, the rebels not only followed the precedent set by Marathas or Afghans before them, they also broke it by offering their new sovereign no powerful leader to protect him. So while the sepoys treated Bahadur Shah with what must have been a familiar mixture of respect and contempt, they also made him into much more than a constitutional figure since it was now the king himself who in a tragic restoration most dangerous to his constitutional status was thrust to the forefront of affairs at least in Delhi.

Yet in appointing officers, disbursing funds, protecting subjects, or remonstrating with his mutinous army, this last Mughal of his line did not in the least behave like an emperor. Instead, he tried to enforce his authority by pleading and cajoling, threatening to abdicate his throne, become an ascetic, and even commit suicide. In other words, this frail and powerless figure had become a moral authority of an altogether novel kind. His physician elaborated upon Bahadur Shah's moral position during his trial, going so far as to say that the ex-king of Delhi had

not emphasized it enough when trying, for instance, to save the English women and children held captive in the palace from massacre: "If the King had kept the women and children in his own female apartments, and on their being demanded by the sepoys had explained to the latter that he would only agree to their (the Christians) being murdered, after his (the King's) own women and children had been first put to death, it was very probable that the sepoys would not have dared to enter the royal seraglio to forcibly seize and kill the Christians" (*TB* 186).

What sort of leadership was this in which a powerless king ruled by the rhetoric of sacrifice? Had India seen such a monarch before outside the pages of books? But we know that this was the very language of sacrifice that the rebels spoke, Hindus to Muslims in their case. In this sense, Bahadur Shah was as much a product of the mutiny as the sepoys he sought to counsel, no matter how unsuccessfully. The next such leader to emerge in India, though one far more successful, was of course Gandhi, who with his fasts unto death also put his own powerlessness on display while speaking the language of sacrifice. Indeed, Ahsanullah Khan's recommendation that the king should have offered his own wives and children to be put to death before countenancing the murder of others was advice that Gandhi himself uttered many times, using as his preferred example of this virtue the sacrifice of another monarch, the legendary Raja Harischandra, who was willing to kill his own wife and son to fulfil his moral duty.

We might say that Queen Victoria restored the Mughal's constitutional status when she took the title Empress of India in the mutiny's wake. In fact, the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, which stopped British reprisals against the rebels and promised a policy of toleration and noninterference in India's religions, was widely seen by Indians as the new empire's founding constitution, establishing a secular order in the subcontinent that did not yet exist in the British Isles. Of course, this second restoration of imperial authority presented the character of a farce when compared to the tragedy of Bahadur Shah's installation during the revolt, not least because it sought to redefine the terms of India's moral compact by robbing the queen's subjects of all initiative in the matter. It was, nevertheless, the mutiny that brought the British Empire into being, rather than the reverse, if only by ushering in the reign of tradition in all its various guises, old, new, and made to order.<sup>29</sup> It was only with the rebellion's aftermath, in other words, that tradition came to replace modernity in the imagination of Indians and Englishmen alike.

I have been concerned in this essay with delineating another vision of the mutiny's modernity than the one retailed by colonial and nationalist writers. It was neither the unity of India in any political sense, nor its division in any religious one, that the revolt brought to light, but rather

an empire of distinctions where the native was not set against the alien but existed alongside it within a moral compact. And if much of this moral compact was drawn from tradition, I have tried to point out that its hesitant achievement during the rebellion of 1857 had unexpected consequences for India's modernity. These became evident in the next period of anti-British mobilization across northern India, Gandhi's movement of noncooperation that began with his defense of the caliphate in 1919. The extraordinary similarity of themes and arguments between these two events must give us pause for thought, even if we do not link them in any causal fashion. Whether it is the sacrifices made by one religious group for another or the practice of noncooperation itself, such elements appear to have been reincarnated from one historical moment to the next. For it was in the mutiny that these factors were transformed out of traditional recognition and made into the stuff of Indian modernity, destabilizing nationalist verities even as they made the nation itself possible in Gandhi's spiritualization of politics.

ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

NOTES

- 1 See for this Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008).
- 2 For this argument see Hannah Arendt, "Imperialism," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1979), 123-302, and Carl Schmitt, *Théorie du Partisan*, trans. Marie-Louise Steinhauser (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 208.
- 3 Pramod K. Nayar, ed., *The Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 163-64 (hereafter cited as *TB*).
- 4 Syud Ahmed Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt* (Agra: Mofussilite Press, 1859), 185.
- 5 For the former comparison see Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *Dastanbuy*, trans. Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970), 29; and for the latter Salim al-Din Quraishi, ed., *Cry for Freedom: Proclamations of Muslim Revolutionaries of 1857* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997), 41.
- 6 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 129.
- 7 Leela Sarup, ed., *The Trial of Mangal Pandey: State Papers* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2007), 3.
- 8 Sarup, ed., *The Trial of Mangal Pandey*, 12.
- 9 Sarup, *The Trial of Mangal Pandey*, 4, 5, 18.
- 10 Sarup, *The Trial of Mangal Pandey*, 161, 164, 166, 167, 170.
- 11 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 31-2.
- 12 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 31-2.
- 13 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 13.
- 14 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 123.
- 15 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 102-3.
- 16 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 178-9.
- 17 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 1-2.
- 18 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 34-5.

- 19 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 22.
- 20 Sarup, *The Trial of Mangal Pandey*, 25, square brackets mine.
- 21 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 185.
- 22 Khan, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 129.
- 23 For an analysis of Gandhi's role in the Khilafat Movement, see Faisal Devji, "A Practice of Prejudice: Gandhi's Politics of Friendship," *Subaltern Studies* 12 (2005): 78-98.
- 24 Abdul Latif, *Attharah-sau Sattawan ka Tarikhi Roznamcheh*, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Delhi: Nadwat al-Musannifin, 1971), 52, translation mine.
- 25 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 102.
- 26 Quraishi, *Cry for Freedom*, 68-72.
- 27 The best biography of Bahadur Shah is William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal* (New York: Vintage, 2006).
- 28 For the Mongol idea of a universal empire, one that was inherited by Tamerlane and his Mughal successors, see Eric Voegelin, "The Order of God," in *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2002), 224-79.
- 29 For the importance of "tradition" in the Raj, see Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 165-209.