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Lucknow: The Cradle Of The First War Of Independence

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ABSTRACT: The annexation of the kingdom of Avadh happened in the year 1856 on the pretext of misgovernment setting out sparks of revolt in the capital city of Lucknow. The kingdom became a province of British India. The Government now vested in Sir James Outram as Chief Commissioner and three senior civil servants, was promptly despatched with the necessary quota of troops to organise divisional administration Lucknow. The city became the focal point of the war of 1857. Some historians regard Lucknow to be the seat of the outbreak of the revolt.

KEYWORDS: revolt, British, Lucknow, independence, sepoys

METHODOLOGY: A detailed study of research papers, books and works of historians across the relevant literature available.

OBJECTIVES: To highlight the role of Lucknow in the first war of Indian Independence.

“The mutiny of 1857 began in February and March in Lucknow, the trouble had spread to Meerut and other parts of Oudh by the last week of April. The 48th native infantry stationed in Lucknow became mutinous and the regimental doctors’ quarters were destroyed by incendiaries. Whether or not the misgivings of the sepoys concerning the notorious greased cartridges was justified or irrelevant...these were the men who first uttered defiance and fired the first shot.”¹

So writes Roshan Taqui, that the famous historians Michael Edward, John Pemble, P.J.O Taylor, Harprasad Chattopadhyayaa and many others believe that the war of independence started in Lucknow on May 3, 1857.

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The event of 1857 marks a watershed in the history of India. The event described by some as the revolt, by some as the mutiny and the first war of independence by others, definitely shook the very roots of the British government in India. There were any causes responsible for the outbreak of 1857 which were political, military, social, religious and economic in character. The immediate cause being the introduction of the Enfield rifle and the greased cartridges in the army. The mutiny that took place on the (by the generally recorded date) 10th of May 1857 in Meerut was followed by the revolt breaking out in other parts of the country. It began in the lines of the native infantry spreading rapidly to the city. Records suggest that the mutiny broke out on the 10th of May, however a study of the different records and research papers suggests that the revolt did begin in Lucknow on an earlier date. This research paper aims to dwell into personal records of contemporary officers, district gazetteers and research works of historians to look deeper into the Lucknow eruption.

Different scholars have expressed their views about the nature of the revolt of 1857. According to the British historian Sir John Seeley, it was merely a *Sepoy Mutiny*. On the other side of views, Dr. K. Datta explains that the revolt as a *military outbreak, which was taken advantage of by certain discontented princes and landlords whose interests had been affected by the new political order*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his book described the revolt as a “*planned war of national independence*” Dr. S.N. Sen, in his book, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, considers the revolt as a fight that began for religion but ended as *a war of independence*. According to Marxist scholars, “*it was the struggle of the soldier-peasant democratic combination against foreign and feudal bondage*.” L.E.R. Rees considered the mutiny a “*war of fanatic religionists against Christians*.” T.R. Holmes explained it as “*the war between civilization and barbarism*.” Indian historian S.B. Chaudhary observed it as “*the first combined attempt of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power*.”

This Rebellion of 1857 is widely believed to have begun as a mutiny by Bengal army soldiers, against the British commanders in the army of the British East India Company. The immediate cause being the issue of the new Enfield rifle that required soldiers to reload by biting off the ends of cartridges greased with pig and cow fat, substances offensive to both. However, a study of the books and gazetteers related to the event with particular reference to the revolt of 1857 brings to light the fact that Lucknow could have been the first place where the revolt erupted. This paper will further present excerpts and quotes of various historians and writers over a period of more than 100 years to further highlight this historical event.

The Revolt at Lucknow

The Subah of Avadh was one of the important provinces of the Mughal empire. The founder of the dynasty of the nawabs of Avadh was Nawab Sadat Ali Khan Burhan ul Mulk of Persia. He was appointed the Subadar in the year 1722 which marks the beginning of the line of the nawabs. For long the nawabs of Avadh retained

all the firms of subordinations with the stance of sovereignty. As many as 11 nawabs ruled over the kingdom of Avadh covering a period of more than 100 years. With the coming in of the British and strengthening of their position in the Indian subcontinent the kingdom shrank nearly to its half and the status of the ruler being reduced to that of a feudatory. The decline of the Mughal dynasty, the battle of Buxar and the Subsidiary Alliance sounded a death knell for the once powerful subah of Avadh. The inherent evils of the subsidiary alliance system led to a gradual decay of the Kingdom of Avadh so much so that Colonel Sleeman in his records wrote in 1849 that, "*Oudh is now, in fact without a Government.*" Expressing a strong dislike for King Wajid Ali Shah he further wrote that, "*The king sees nobody else save the singers and eunuchs, and does not even pretend to know anything or care anything about public affairs*"³

The annexation of the kingdom of Avadh happened therefore in 1856 on the pretext of misgovernment setting out sparks of revolt in the capital city of Lucknow. The kingdom now became a province of British India. The Government now vested in Sir James Outram as Chief Commissioner and three senior civil servants were promptly despatched with the necessary quota of troops to organise divisional administration.⁴

The annexation immediately disturbed the entire system and 60,000 of the royal troops were disbanded leading to a situation of confusion and anarchy. Furthermore, the annexation struck at the roots of the economy with the artists and craftsmen losing royal patronage and consequently their livelihood. The occupation of the royal palace of Chattr Manzil by Outram's successor, Coverly Jackson enraged the public. The stipendiaries were deprived of their pensions by the Government. The peasants were ill treated while the police and the judiciary were unable to improve the administration in Avadh. Sir Henry Lawrence soon arrived on the scene in 1857 as the Chief Commissioner and tried to resolve the grievances of the various sections of the society. Though the matters under consideration were not held in abeyance the event which triggered the already agitated populace was the greased cartridge issue.

The military force in the capital and its environs on April 30, 1857, as recorded in the accounts of Lady Inglis was:

Native	infantry, regulars	2,400
"	" irregulars	1,600
Police	" "	800
Native	cavalry, regulars	600
"	" irregulars	600
Mounted	police	900

6,900

Artillery,	two	batteries	
Europeans, H.M.	32nd		700
Europeans, H.M.	84th,		one weak company.

It was at this time and in this strained atmosphere, Dr Wells a surgeon, in April 1857 happened to visit a Medical store as he felt unwell. He *“applied to his mouth a bottle taken from the hospital medicines containing an carminative.”* It was a blunder rather a sin committed against Indian culture by the surgeon attached to the 48th Native Infantry which was understood as an interference into the religious customs by the Hindus. The retaliation was expressed by way of firing at the surgeon’s house and on 18th of April even a clod was thrown at the Chief Commissioner’s residence which was a clear indication of deep seated discontent and simmering agitation. On the 2nd of May the 7th Oudh regiment, *‘refused to bite the greased cartridge when ordered by its own officers including a Brigadier.’*⁵ Soon however, the recalcitrant Avadh sepoy were brought to the book and later dismissed.

The District Gazetteer on Lucknow also mentions about a surgeon identified as Dr Wells of the 48th Native Infantry in Lucknow Cantonment who *had ‘inadvertently’ tested medicine by drinking it from the bottle before handing it over to a sick Brahman soldier.* This act of the doctor which undoubtedly was a breach of faith, spread among the sepoy like wild fire and angered the sepoy so much so that that they avenged the insult by setting fire to the bungalow of Dr Wells. Naresh Singh, former officer on special duty (research), UP Vidhan Sabha secretariat, who has done extensive work on history of Lucknow and Delhi said, *“Though the medicine bottle was immediately destroyed following complaints lodged by Indian sepoy, the doctor’s act had intensified their rage which was brewing due to low wage, poor treatment and no promotion. A couple of days later, the surgeon’s bungalow was set on fire and it was the first act of mutiny in the English military cantonment based in Lucknow.”*⁶

The research done by Mr Naresh found that on May 2, 1857, the 7th regiment of Mariaon cantonment, also called Palton Gaon, refused to use cartridges as they feared that the cartridge had been greased with the fat of the cow and the pig. The matter was then reported by Captain Watson to Brigadier Grey. It is reported that a couple of days later on the 4th of May two Indian sepoy were killed by the British officials. *“The rest of the sepoy involved in the mutiny were hanged,”* writes Naresh. He further writes in his research that *“Meanwhile, sepoy at Musabagh station (today near Dubagga power house) received a letter asking them to join the revolt. The letter was revealed to British officers by a subedar, following which some sepoy fled the cantonment while others surrendered. However, on May 7, the subedar’s hut was set ablaze and Brigadier-General Sir Henry Montgomery Lawrence wrote to governor general Charles Canning, stating that the coup is going to have great effect in the city of Lucknow,”* as recorded and read in the UP gazetteer citing references of GW Forrest’s writings and various volumes of freedom struggle in UP. *“The people of Avadh were so bitterly hostile to the British Raj, that in the course of 10 days,”* as GW Forrest puts it, *“English administration in Oudh had vanished like a dream and not left a wreck behind,”* read the archives of UP freedom struggle.

The Lucknow Gazetteer further records, *“What followed was an open armed revolt in Malihabad by May 27, and Battle of Chinhath on May 30. Machchhi Bhawan was blown up on July 1 followed by invasion of Residency. On July 2, Lawrence was killed by rebels and on July 21, Major Banks who succeeded Lawrence as officiating chief commissioner was shot in the head while he was examining a vital outpost. The siege of rebellions lasted for 87 days”* Rosie Llewellyn Jones the celebrated author of Avadh History writes that the first sign of the uprising was on 2 May 1857 when the 7th Avadh Irregular Force, one of the new regiments, stationed in the British cantonment at Lucknow, refused to use greased cartridges.⁷

This army was disarmed by Sir Henry Lawrence the very next day, and two weeks later twenty soldiers who took part in this protest were hanged in front of the Macchi Bhawan Fort. The Qaisarbagh Palace which was the abode of the kings of Avadh was raided by the British, who seized the crown jewels, treasure and weapons. Many buildings which lay between the British Residency and the Macchi Bhawan Fort were demolished on the orders of Sir Henry Lawrence. He had an 18-pounder gun put on top of the Fort gateway, pointing towards the street where the public hangings were taking place. Lucknow Cantonment at Marion was lost at the end of May. The greased cartridges provided the spark for the subsequent uprising, Lucknow historian Mr. Roshan Taqui said, quite correctly, that it was *‘the stealing of Avadh that was the key to revolt, far more important than tales of greased cartridges or plots to convert all sepoys to Christianity.’*⁸

Lady Inglis, the wife of Lieutenant Colonel Inglis of the 32nd Regiment in her records, *The Siege of Lucknow a Diary* has written that the troops of the 13th Native Infantry were asked to use the greased cartridges and they staunchly refused. Her journal also records the incident related to the surgeon who sparked off the outbreak in Lucknow. *Dr. Wells, 48th N.I., had his house burned down, and combustible arrows were found in Brigadier Handscomb's and Captain Barwell's (71st N.I.) compounds; but the culprits were not discovered. Such was the state of affairs up to May 3, when my diary commences,* writes Lady Inglis.⁹

She further records in her journal, on 3rd of May *“As we were driving to church this evening, about five o'clock, we met Mr. Barber, of the irregular cavalry, who said that his regiment was just ordered off to Moosa Bagh, where the 7th Oude Infantry were in a state of mutiny... Captain Hayes said he expected opposition in passing through the city, so the men were loaded.”* Excerpts from, *The Siege of Lucknow, A Diary* by Honourable Lady Inglis, London. James R. Osgood, Mcilvaine and Co. 1892

By May 1857, Meerut and Delhi were engulfed by the fire of the rebellion and were seized by Indian soldiers. The last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar issued a general farman declaring that he held possession of the whole country and requested the Avadh troops, among others to join in the clarion call of independence. The British who were now in a precarious situation started preparing to defend themselves in Lucknow. During this period in early summer, writes Roshan Taqui, *a procession to the Hussainabad Imambara was fired on by British troops, and the leader of the procession, Agha Mirza Kambalposh, was hanged by the British, in front of the Macchi Bhawan Fort.* Then the house of the wealthiest moneylender in Lucknow, Shah Behari Lal, was forcibly seized by the British, and incorporated into the British

Residency, for its strategic importance. The townspeople also reported seeing convoys of carts filled with grain ammunitions heading for the Residency, as well as firewood, charcoal and fodder for the cattle being taken in.¹⁰

Surendra Nath Sen in his book Eighty fifty seven (1857) writes that, *the flashpoint of the rebellion was the introduction of the Enfield rifle*. The cartridges for this weapon were believed to be greased with the fat of the cow and the pig, which defiled the religion of both the Hindu and Muslim sepoys. At Lucknow, the 71st Oudh I. I. (a local corps under British command) also refused cartridges for musketry practice, alleging they were greased. The officer involved is said to have ordered them to bite the cartridges because he had not received the revised instructions for loading drill.¹¹ This again reiterates the fact that Lucknow did constitute the focal point of the revolt of 1857.

Wajid Ali Shah, the exiled King of Avadh reached Calcutta and thereupon decided to send his mother and brother to meet Queen Victoria, on his behalf. He was put under house arrest at Fort William for several months. In Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal the queen, provided leadership to the subjects and proved to be the royal focal point for them. Her young son, Birjis Qadr, was crowned King in July 1857 as the nominal head of the rebellious kingdom of Avadh. By the middle of November, British forces led by Sir Colin Campbell entered Lucknow. Soon the British forces were able to rescue the Indian and British people trapped in the Residency. But his military force was not strong enough to recapture the whole city, and he had to withdraw to the Alambagh Palace, south of Lucknow.

A British officer wrote that by March 1858, the inhabitants *'had left nothing undone to strengthen the city...every outlet had been covered by a work and strong barricade and loop holed parapets had been constructed in every direction. The various buildings formed a range of most massive palaces and walled courts of vast extent and they had been fortified with the greatest skill. Guns swept the long streets and narrow lanes and others were mounted even on the domes of mosques and royal palaces*. In the countryside, villagers were strongly advised not to supply the British with food and other supplies which proved to be a reasonable move on the part of the rebels and patriots. The British reports do mention about the shortage of supplies.

On the 4th of May an official letter from the Chief Commissioner of Avadh informed the Governor General *"that on the 2nd instant the 7th Oudh Regiment, stationed seven miles from the Lucknow Cantonments, refused to bite the cartridge when ordered by its own officers, and again by the Brigadier. It was ordered to parade on the 4th. On the 3rd several symptoms of disaffection appeared. At 4 p.m. the Brigadier reported it in a very mutinous state*".¹³

Gubbins also records that in April one of the three regiments stationed at the capital was the 48th N. I which had long been reputed to be one of the finest in the service. Sir H. M. Wheeler, the General commanding at Kanpur was the colonel of the regiment for some time. It was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Palmer during the period under study. *Dr. Wells, the surgeon of the regiment, having occasion to visit the medicine store of the hospital, and feeling at the time indisposed, incautiously applied to his mouth a bottle taken from the hospital medicines containing a carminative. This act was in contravention of the rules of Hindoo*

caste.¹⁴ The native apothecary, who attended Dr Wells, was unfortunately on bad terms with him, and informed the sepoys in hospital of what had been done which led to a general outcry. Colonel Palmer assembled the native officers, and in their presence destroyed the bottle subjecting Dr.Wells to a well deserved rebuke. However, this failed to satisfy the troops. *A few nights later, the bungalow in which he resided was fired, and Dr. Wells escaped, but with the loss of most of his property.*

The above analysis clearly indicates that the mutiny did begin in Lucknow and has been recorded by several historians and contemporary writers. Avadh continued to be an important centre of the war of independence with the people of Lucknow giving a tough time to the English and holding siege over the city and the nearby areas. The Begum of Avadh, Hazrat Mahal led the troops and fought the war on many fronts. By the end of June 1857 the rebels around 7000 in number from other districts gathered at Nawabganj near Lucknow making the British position vulnerable. Even after the British force under Havelock and Outram had entered the Residency on 25 September 1857 the condition of the British in Lucknow remained weak in the extreme. The rebels were busy improving their position. Percussion caps and all kinds of ammunition were being produced in Lucknow for the rebel forces. Artisans were brought in from Delhi especially for this purpose. *A workshop was set up in Faizabad for the purposes of repairing heavy guns.* Lucknow became the chief focus of fighting. Both the rebels and the English realized the importance of having control over the city. It became the symbol of power and authority. It was when Colin Campbell entered Lucknow that relief came for the British forces in Lucknow. It took 18 months for the British to reconquer Lucknow.

The garden city of Lucknow fell and became a victim of loot and as described in Russell's Diary. According to the Times before the army left Lucknow the loot amounted to £600,000 and within a week had shot up to a million and a quarter sterling.

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