



Research Article

Revolt of 1857 In Hisar Region and Beyond: An Eyewitness Record of Sant Sahab Ram Rahad

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Abstract

The historiography of the Revolt of 1857 has been dominated by colonial archives and elite nationalist narratives, which have largely silenced peasant, artisanal, and rural voices. This article recovers the subaltern dimensions of 1857 by foregrounding the eyewitness account of Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad (1814–1891), a folk-saint and katha-vachak of western Haryana. Drawing on his vernacular manuscripts Saar Sabad Gunjar and Teen Jambhsar, this paper argues that the revolt in Haryana was not confined to sepoys but was a broad-based agrarian uprising involving villages, religious communities, and ordinary cultivators. Rahad's text, composed in Marwadi oral-poetic form, documents the causes, spread, organization, and repression of 1857 across Sirsa, Hisar, Fatehabad, Bhiwani districts of Haryana and adjoining regions of Rajasthan. It provides rare evidence of inter-community mobilization, local strategies of resistance, and the moral-religious framing of anti-colonial struggle. The article concludes that integrating such vernacular and oral sources is essential for writing a people's history of 1857.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Revolt of 1857 has been subject to a great historiographical debate since the very beginning. Initially, it was dominated by colonial archives. Some contemporary British officials saw it as a Muslim conspiracy to restore the Mughal empire. However, it did not gain much traction due to lack of evidence. Within the official colonial narrative, the dominant view was that the revolt was a sepoy mutiny and the civilian participation was only secondary. Even in the 20th century, some scholars tried to portray the revolt of 1857 as an elite struggle dependent on the leadership of the feudal class. This feudal character of the movement was even accepted by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru while also accepting the rudimentary, uncoordinated nationalistic element with anti-foreign sentiments.

On the other hand, Karl Marx was the first prominent contemporary scholar to counter the narrow official interpretation. He argued that what is being considered as a military mutiny is a national revolt. However, this view could not become popular in the 19th century owing to British suppression of freedom of Press in India. With the emergence of strong nationalist opinion, in the beginning of 20th century, VD Savarkar called it the First war of Independence fought for Swadharma (religious duty) and Swaraj (self-rule). Later, this view was supported by many nationalist scholars like SB Chaudhary who argued that it was the first combined effort of many classes of people to challenge a foreign power. The nationalist scholars also placed special emphasis on the Hindu-Muslim unity during the revolt and considered the leaders of the revolt as patriotic heroes fighting for a common cause with a unified nationalist objective. This nationalist opinion was criticized by many scholars who questioned the existence of 'nation' and its idea in the modern sense during the mid-19th century.

Later, Marxist scholars broadened the view on the causes of the revolt from the immediate religious cause of greased cartridges to the larger socio-economic causes that occurred due to the British revenue system, expansionist politics and a reformist attitude laden with superiority complex as the 'White man's burden'. Thus, while looking at it from the class perspective, Rudrangshu Mukherjee highlighted a soldier-peasant alliance popularising the revised idea of Eric Stokes that Soldiers were the peasants in uniform. His study on the nature of the revolt in Awadh region was a step in the direction to look at the people's participation in different regions with varying intensity.

The attempt to look at the participation of marginalised sections in the revolt of 1857 began with the subaltern studies in 1980s. Subaltern Studies scholars have argued that to understand 1857, historians must look beyond the archive to folk songs, oral traditions, and vernacular texts that express the consciousness of marginalized groups. Scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gautam Bhadra focussed on the grassroot participation. Veena Talwar's study on the participation of Tawaifs of Delhi in the revolt gave it further gendered consciousness.

In this series, we shall look at an often-overlooked centre of revolt i.e. Haryana. Here, western Haryana presents a critical case. Despite being one of the most intensely affected regions, it lacks extensive Indian-authored documentation. There are a few primary sources of the extent and intensity of the revolt in

this region. One such eye witness record is that of Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad (1814–1891), a folk-saint and *katha-vachak* of western Haryana. However, since Sahab Ram ji wrote in a poetic manner using couplets, there is a challenge of establishing the correct chronology of events and there is a scope for subjective interpretation of events.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL GAP

The primary obstacle to writing the history of 1857 from an Indian perspective is the scarcity of indigenous written sources. Most of the contemporary documents are British records that present the colonial viewpoint. Indian literacy was low, and the colonial state suppressed Indian writings on the revolt. Indian perspectives thus survive in "hidden literature" or in folk memory: songs, bhajans, and stories. In spite of the limitations, efforts have been made since the time of the revolt to record the memories but their interpretation is still a work in progress. Initially, the emphasis was on the broader national development which could not appropriately highlight the localised rebellions. One of the earliest such efforts was made by Tapti Roy while studying the popular nature of the revolt in the Bundelkhand region. She examined the local actions and popular participation beyond the elitist narrative. Similarly, Rudrangshu Mukherjee who studied the peasant revolt of Awadh in 'Awadh in Revolt (1857-58)' also tried to study it from the soldier-peasant identity.

There are significant contemporary sources on the revolt in the Delhi region. Zahir Dehalvi's '*Dastan-e-Ghadar*' and Mirza Ghalib's '*Dastanbuy*' presents an eye witness record of the sepoy attack on Delhi, the destruction of their beloved city of Shahjahanabad and the ultimate return of the British authority. Both of them belonged to the court of the Bahadur Shah Zafar and despised the sepoys. Ghalib's intention was to convince the new British masters of his loyalty in order to get the pension. However, in his personal letters to his friends, Ghalib described the sorry state of affairs in Delhi after the complete failure of the administration. Nayanjot Lahiri also did remarkable work in Delhi. In her book 'Commemorating and remembering 1857: The revolt in Delhi and its afterlife', she focused more on the rural areas of Delhi away from Shahjahanabad. Over and above such written records, there is a chilling yet interesting account of oral history of Udmi Ram Jat hailing from Libaspur village at the outskirts of Delhi. The issue with Haryana is that no prior Indian-authored text provides a detailed account of Haryana in 1857. Folk singers preserved memories, but these remained uncompiled. Rahad's significance lies in converting oral memory into written text. He was present in Sadalpur village near Adampur when the revolt began, and as a *katha-vachak* he travelled and sang his account. His work thus represents a convergence of orality, religiosity, and historiography. Sahab Ram Rahad completed his work in 1890, almost 33 years after the incident and it was published after independence. This proves the brutal British machinery post-1857 that did not allow any kind of indigenous writing on the great revolt. Several scholars have tried to locate Haryana on the map of the revolt of 1857. One of the first such step was taken by Dr KC Yadav through his book 'Revolt of 1857 in Haryana'. He highlighted

how the revolt in Haryana was led by the peasants and common masses without any exclusive leadership of the feudal elements. He even claimed through his meticulous research that it was the Ambala cantonment where the mutiny took place even before the Meerut. Another significant source of study on the revolt of 1857 in Haryana is that of Dr. Mahender Singh. In his book '*Haryana Mein 1857: Janvidroh, Daman Va Lok Chetna*', he focused on the localized uprisings, British repression and public consciousness especially in Western Haryana and Ahirwal region. His detailed study on the Western Haryana becomes particularly important for this article as Dr Mahender Singh is one of the few scholars to extensively study contemporary sources such as the account of Sant Sahab Ram Rahad among others.

Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad: Life and Work

Sant Sahab Ram Rahad was born in 1814 in Hundiya village, Rajasthan. He initially became a saint and later returned to household life, spending most of his life in Landhri village, Hisar. He wrote two works, *Saar Sabad Gunjar* and *Teen Jambhsar*. He completed his writing in 1890 just a year before his death. This material was collected by Acharya Krishnanand from his family and was later compiled from his handwritten pothis and published in 1982 by Swami Atmaprakash.

Unfolding of Events

The great uprising of 1857 did not emerge in a vacuum, rather, it was the explosive culmination of a century of simmering agrarian discontent, economic exploitation, and systematic colonial overreach. The initial spark was ignited on March 29, 1857, at the Barrackpore cantonment near Calcutta, where Mangal Pandey of the 34th Native Infantry openly mutinied against his British superiors over the imposition of the religiously defiling greased cartridges. This localized rebellion soon converted into a full-scale revolt on May 10, 1857, when the sepoys at Meerut broke into open rebellion, liberated their imprisoned comrades, and marched decisively toward Delhi.

These sepoys stormed the Mughal capital the following day and forced the weak and reluctant Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to accept the titular leadership of the movement as described by Zahir Dehalvi. This effectively transformed a military mutiny into a politically legitimized war of national liberation that challenged the institutional legitimacy of the British East India Company across Northern India.

As the news of the sepoy outbreak started spreading, the strategically vital region of Haryana was the first to respond owing to its close geographic proximity to the imperial capital and its deep-seated resentment toward the colonial revenue settlements. The initial military rupture in the region occurred at the Ambala cantonment, where localized sepoy disturbances actually preceded the Meerut outbreak as noted by the colonial archives. Several small confrontations had already taken place in the Ambala cantonment in the months of March and April of 1857.

A soldier Sham Singh of the 5th Infantry is noted to have informed Forsyth, the Deputy Commissioner of Ambala, about the simmering discontent among the soldiers. On 10th May, 1857, the soldiers of the 60th regiment surrounded several

British officers in Ambala cantonment. Gradually, the news of the mutiny started spreading to other parts and once the news of the fall of Delhi reached the western districts, the colonial administrative machinery collapsed with astonishing speed.

In Hisar region, consisting of present-day districts of Hisar, Fatehabad, Sirsa, Bhiwani and Dadri, the initial violent uprising was controlled by the British but on 27th May, 1857, with the arrival of Muhammad Azam Khan, the Jagirdar of Bhattu and a relative of Bahadur Shah Zafar, changed the situation. He was supported fully by Shahbaz Begh, the Deputy Collector of Hisar. On the same day, 14th Irregular Cavalry revolted in Hansi and killed fourteen Britishers. All the major officers absconded and took shelter in Rajgarh of Bikaner princely state.

After securing Hansi, the soldiers moved towards Hisar on 29th May and joined Muhammad Azam Khan to kill the Collector Wedderburn, his wife and son along with other prominent British officers totalling fifteen. In Hisar, revolutionaries looted the state treasury and stormed the prison and released the prisoners. After this, the British administration collapsed and the responsibility of Hisar and the adjoining regions was undertaken by Shahbaz Begh. On the other hand, a battery of soldiers along with Muhammad Azam Khan moved towards Delhi.

This kind of aggressive revolt was replicated in Sirsa under the leadership of Mir Samad Khan and his uncle Ali Gohar. The British officers posted at Sirsa took shelter with the princely states of Patiala and Ferozpur. In order to crush the revolt, British forces moved from Ferozpur towards Haryana under the leadership of Van Cortlandt. He was supported by the Bikaner and Kashmir states. They were met at the outskirts of Sirsa by the revolutionaries under the leadership of Nawab Noor Muhammad Khan of Rania. In the ensuing conflict, the revolutionaries were defeated and nawab fled. He was later caught and hanged in Ferozpur.

After securing this victory, British under Cortlandt and Pearse's leadership, moved towards Hisar where they were met with fierce opposition by revolutionaries in villages such as Bhattu, Khara Barwala, Bhodia, Gorakhpur, and Agroha among others. Finally, he reached Hisar on 17th July and imprisoned Muhammad Azam's wife and by 2nd August he captured Hansi. Muhammad Azam immediately marched from Delhi towards Hisar.

Azam was able to secure Hisar initially but this invited strong response from Cortlandt. The situation gradually started shifting in favour of British who were supported by the royal families of Jaipur, Bharatpur, Pataudi, Loharu, Dujana, Bikaner, Patiala and Kashmir among others. As Cortlandt started securing the major centres of Hisar and Hansi, his brutal atrocities were started being unleashed on the masses in hinterlands as well. Revolutionaries were crushed under the road roller in Hansi. In this series, Rohnat village became a legend where Swami Bhirdi Das, Nondaram Jat and Rupa Khati along with other colleagues were tied to the cannon and blew away. At least 25 women jumped into the community well along with their children to avoid British cruelties. Within the span of a few months, British were able to restore their rule.

This archival information is strongly corroborated by the eye witness record of Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad who was a religious

Katha Vachak and played an important role in spreading the news among masses.

Rahad refers to 1857 as “*Samvat 1914 ki Gadar*,” (The Revolt of 1914 as per Vikram Samvat Calendar corresponding to revolt of 1857) framing it within a cosmology of dharma versus adharma. He identifies causes such as the mixing of fat in flour and cartridges:

“Sab Angreja ke man bhai, aate mein charbi milwai. Kartoos ke Charbi Paasa, Khaand Ghrit mein charbi bhasha.”

For him, the revolt was divine punishment for colonial adharma. This confirms the greased cartridges and an attack on the religion as the immediate cause of the revolt. However, while the grievance was religious in nature, Rahad also confirms that the movement itself shows communal solidarity: “Sarsai aru Bangal tak bhai, mil Mlechchha hyan gadar machayi”

From Sirsa to Bengal, Hindus and Muslims fought together. It shows that the term used for Muslims in common parlance is Mlechchha, generally used for outsiders since ancient times. But the broader message from this couplet is that there were united efforts against the common ‘enemy’ reflecting the acknowledgement of the problem as well as the perpetrators showing the political nature of the revolt.

Secondly, the people were aware of the approximate geographical spread of the movement i.e. from Sirsa in Haryana to Bengal region. More precise information about the knowledge of the spread of the sepoys’ anger can be seen in the following lines:

“Meerut aad Lahore vichale, fire fauj aagya nahi pale”

The sepoys were freely roaming around in the region extending from Meerut to Lahore and the administration had collapsed completely showing the failure of the colonial administrative machinery and its unpopular nature. The oppressive and unpopular government invited violent uprising that can be confirmed from the following words:

“Kayi Angrej gaye te hai maare, raj gaya vibhre nar saare”.
 “Sabal nibal ko lootana laage, chor lootere jahan tahan jaage”
 “Raja mare lok vichlaye, aapas mein sab loot machaye”.

The targeted killing of Britishers shows the violent nature of the revolt and the exact knowledge of the enemy among the masses. However, it is important to understand the depth and intensity of the oppression that must have forced this kind of brutal killing. Krantimaan Park of Hisar was later dedicated by the British to commemorate the dead. This also shows that the robberies were undertaken by anti-social elements and lawlessness became the norm once the administration fell. The same description is given by Ghalib in his contemporary account “*Dastanbu*” that shows that once the sepoys arrived in Delhi, the administration collapsed immediately confirming its hollowness. This fact is also confirmed by the British record and other secondary sources as we have mentioned earlier.

Then, Rahad goes on to throw some light on the arrival of sepoys in Hisar-Hansi region leading to massive ‘*gadar*’:

“Meerut maar hansa aye bhaari,
 hisar gadar machyo bahu bhaari”

As discussed above, the soldiers first arrived in Hansi and then moved towards Hisar. In Hisar, with the arrival of Muhammad Azam Khan, the ‘*Gadar*’ took a significant turn when the combined feudal-soldier-peasant forces killed Wedderburn and several other Britishers.

While discussing the emergence of sepoys, Sahab Ram ji also noted the mode of action adopted by the rebels. It can be seen in the disruption of postal service:

“Dak bandh kar dini jab hi,
 Tooti naad jeevan hi kab hi.”

He establishes the corollary between the administration and postal service similar to that between head and the body. He mentions that as body dies by beheading the head, so does the administration in the absence of postal system:

“Naad gaye dehi mar jaave,
 Dak band kiye raj nasave”.

It shows the understanding of the common people regarding the intricacies of the administration and their attempt at cutting the communication lines of the British Raj. While British records do show the difficulty in restoring the law and order, the clear picture of the mode of action adopted by the revolutionaries can be seen in this record.

Then, Sahab Ram ji goes on to talk about the planning and organisation by the masses. He says that the villagers from thirty villages gathered, collected weapons, and built makeshift fort in Adampur:

“Goli aru barood mangayo, Dhudh kot saj kilo banayo”
 “Tees gaavn Adupra aye, jahan heero Shadool rahaye”.

The military planning of the villagers even in the absence of any centralised or feudal support is par excellence. Rahad describes organized resistance, not spontaneous violence. Villagers even melted domestic utensils to make weapons: “*Bandooka barchhi aur kataari, tod kadhav ghadae sari*”. They blocked the roads, cut communication channels, and established collective defense:

“Bandhya thath rahe sab bhai”.

They also organized provisioning and were preparing for the prolonged fight:

“Jal aru ann ka bharya bhandara”.

In order to prepare for the incoming fight, Rahad mentions, Bishnois conducted their traditional hawan or fire ritual of Lord Vishnu while the Muslims were making weapons:

“Hom Kare Vishnu ku Dhyave, Musalman sab katak banave”. All this confirms that the masses were aware of the need to mobilise, make logistical arrangements and fortify themselves in order to make a long-lasting stand. The extent of mobilisation was so intense that Sahab Ram Ji notes that:

“Panra se Pachyasi saala, Dilli ku gaye Jambh Kripala”

(Every able-bodied follower of Guru Jambheshwar between 15-85 years of age moved towards Delhi).

Although, there might be some exaggeration which is often a challenge with the oral history but the broad message is clear that the situation was dreadful for the British as the popular participation was very high. An organised revolutionary band from Hisar-Hansi region moving towards Delhi to protect the Mughal capital under Muhammad Azam Khan is confirmed by official records as well. Similarly, an English officer, Mildew, could not travel from Sirsa to Hisar via Bhattu because all villages were in revolt. General Van Cortlandt required Bikaner's help to reach Bhadra. This confirms the density of the uprising described by Sahab Ram ji Rahad. Their own sources also name the same villages where Van Cortlandt and Pearse had to face the resistance.

Geography and Social Base of the Revolt

While earlier we discussed about the peoples' knowledge of the broader geographical area engulfed under the fire of the popular anger, Sahab Ram Ji Rahad's most important contribution is his enumeration of approximately 136 villages of the Haryana-Punjab-Rajasthan bordering areas belonging mainly to the Bishnoi community that participated in the uprising. These include:

- Sirsa-Fatehabad belt: Badopal, Chindad, Chautala, Gorakhpur, Khairampur, Khara Khedi, Sarangpur, Nandodi, etc.
- Bhiwani-Hisar belt: Adampur, Badwa, Chaudhariwas, Chirod, Jhumpa, Kalwas, Lilas, Rawat Khera, Sadalpur, Talwandi, Tokas etc.
- Punjab: Sardarpura, Raipura, Dutaravali, Seeto etc.
- Rajasthan: Chamar Khera, Sangariya, Lakhasar etc.

This refutes the claim that 1857 was limited to cantonments. Sahab Ram Ji shows the mass participation of villages spanning across a huge region.

He also notes the role of the Bishnois, followers of Guru Jambheshwar, joined by Muslims in decentralised planning of the execution of the revolt. However, the coverage of the region in Sahab Ram's poem spans a huge area suggesting there must have been an even broader participation.

3. DISCUSSION

Rahad's narrative challenges three assumptions:

1. Beyond Sepoy Mutiny: The involvement of peasants and non-military groups shows a broad social base. It clearly proves the biasness of the colonial record that tried to convince the government in London about the unpopular nature of the mere Sepoy mutiny. The discontent against an oppressive rule was

widespread and the revolt was actually led by the masses despite the lack of resources.

2. Religious vs Secular Framing: Participants understood 1857 as a defense of dharma. The cartridge issue was both material and symbolic. The binary of dharma vs adharma can also be seen clearly in the practice such as conducting fire rituals and paying homage to the deity before beginning the war. However, the other contemporary source within Haryana and studies in different places such as Awadh has found that the underlying cause was socio-economic in nature. This can be gauged from the fact that as per Sahab Ram Ji Rahad, the wider participation was of peasants who did not have to face either cartridges or the fat mixed flour. Their participation once the mutiny had broken out reflects the popular nature of grievances. Sudden collapse of the administration is another factor that proves the unpopular nature of the British administration. Such an abysmal state cannot only be because of any single factor as Disraeli said- 'The rise and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges.'

3. Local Agency: The detailed village lists and logistical notes show planning without central leadership. This directly counters the narrative that the revolt of 1857 was led only by the elite sections of dispossessed zamindars and the sepoys. People's grievances, their planning and their execution was independent and thoroughly planned. It was this consciousness among the masses that became the source of sustained political movement against the colonial rule in the coming times.

4. CONCLUSION

Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad's account is crucial for reconstructing the people's revolt of 1857 in western Haryana. It shows the revolt was widespread, participatory, and rooted in agrarian and religious grievances. The silence of Haryana in mainstream histories reflects a lack of sources, not a lack of resistance. By translating the oral memory of the broader peasant communities, he provides a rare, indigenous perspective that directly refutes the traditional view that kept it confined to "sepoys mutiny". His detailed documentation of 136 participating villages across the Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan borders shifts the geographic and social focus of the rebellion away from military cantonments and elite feudal strongholds, grounding it firmly within a broad-based, horizontal agrarian uprising.

Crucially, Rahad's narrative also shows how material, socio-economic grievances were seamlessly translated into a moral-religious framework of *dharma* versus *adharma*. Rather than portraying a series of spontaneous, chaotic outbursts, his verses reveal a highly organized, autonomous peasant consciousness that was expressed by cutting the communication channels, long-term logistical provisioning, and explicit inter-community solidarity.

This account complements the available colonial records. Colonial archives provide the macro-structural frame giving details of military movements, administration collapse, and logistical challenges, while Sant Sahab Ram Ji Rahad's vernacular poetry captures the micro-structural grid,

highlighting the local community agency, logistics, and ideological consensus that supported the rebellion on the ground.

Ultimately, this paper shows that the lack of indigenous primary sources for the revolt of 1857 is not because of the lack of literary tradition in India but because of brutal state repression that did not allow vernacular literature on the subject. Either such sources survived by criticising the anarchy caused by the soldiers with a flattering tone towards British as in the case of Dastanbuy of Ghalib or in the manner of oral history as mentioned in the case of Udmi Ram Jat. Sahab Ram Ji could overpower this challenge by writing it almost 33 years after the incident and by keeping it confidential under his family's possession till even after the independence. It is because of this precise reason that this poetic document, perhaps, becomes one of the most crucial sources to unfold the great revolt from an indigenous and popular perspective.

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