



Popular Resistance In Eastern Uttar Pradesh During The 1857 Revolution

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of grassroots mobilization and popular resistance in Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the Revolution of 1857, emphasizing the active participation of peasants, artisans, and marginalized groups. Moving beyond elite-centered narratives, it highlights how local grievances, stemming from oppressive land policies, economic exploitation, and cultural disruptions fuelled widespread rebellion against colonial authority. The research examines the formation of local networks, the role of village leaders, and the convergence of social and religious sentiments that sustained the revolutionary spirit. It argues that the movement in Eastern Uttar Pradesh was not merely a military uprising but a collective expression of socio-economic and political discontent rooted in local realities. By analysing archival records, folk traditions, and regional accounts, this paper situates the revolution as a people's struggle that redefined notions of resistance and challenged the colonial order at its grassroots level.

Keywords: Grassroots mobilization, Popular resistance, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Revolution of 1857, Peasants and artisans, colonial oppression, Local leadership

The Revolution of 1857 stands as a defining moment in the collective memory of the people of North India, remembered even today with profound pride. Interpretations of its true nature have remained diverse and ongoing, shaped by scholars' differing ideological perspectives. British historians and writers commonly described it as a "sepoy mutiny," led and supported by sections of the Indian feudal elite who were dissatisfied with British policies and the loss of their economic privileges. Yet, even within these accounts, there exist clear indications of widespread popular resistance.

Contrary to the colonial claim that the British were taken by surprise by a sudden revolt of loyal soldiers, Hindi writer Pradip Saxena reveals that around twenty pamphlets predicting unrest were published nearly six months before the 1857 Revolution.¹ One of these, *An Account of the Outbreak at Bolarum* (1856), discussed the growing dissatisfaction among the people and sepoys that could lead to rebellion.² These pamphlets were written by ordinary British citizens who had either visited India or were in contact with those living there.³ Despite their importance, Indian historians have rarely used these sources. Saxena believes that colonial historians deliberately concealed such evidence to justify the unexpected British defeats during the uprising.⁴

Most British historians, including military and civil officers who wrote about the 1857 Revolution, argued that the rebellion was mainly caused by discontented soldiers of the Bengal Army and a few dissatisfied members of the feudal elite acting out of personal motives. They often portrayed the participation of common people as mere acts of plunder. However, this view overlooks the reality that ordinary people actively supported the rebels in large numbers, reflecting widespread discontent and strong grassroots mobilization against British rule. Popular resistance was particularly organized and sustained in the Awadh

region, though it was evident across many areas where the revolution took place. This paper aims to explore the nature of grassroots mobilization and popular resistance in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, with special focus on the Gorakhpur and Banaras divisions.

The first major instance of grassroots mobilization and popular resistance took place at Paina, in present-day Deoria district, where local zamindars seized 31 grain-laden boats and sank several of them. Across the Ghaghara River, leaders from Narharpur organized a revolt by freeing 50 prisoners working at Barahalganj and taking control of the ghat, boats, and the route to Azamgarh.⁵ On June 10, the Muslim residents of Mahuadabar village killed six European officers fleeing from Faizabad, prompting British forces under Deputy Magistrate Peppe to burn the village on June 13.⁶ By mid-June 1857, British authority in several villages, including Bansgaon, Ghagha, Satasi, and Pondepar, had collapsed, and the area was largely controlled by local rebels.⁷ The tehsils of Khalilabad and Cappainganj also came under rebel control, forcing nearly all British officers to flee Gorakhpur except Magistrate F.M. Bird.⁸ One British writer described these events as a “systematic rebellion” in the Gorakhpur region.⁹

The soldiers of the Bengal Army stationed in the region first revolted at Azamgarh on June 3, 1857, and the uprising spread rapidly. Two British officers were killed, and the rebels seized about seven lakh rupees from the government treasury. At the same time, popular resistance emerged as officials of the Muhammadabad Gohna tehsil fled to Ghazipur. The rebellion extended to Chirayakot, Jahanaganj, and Barahal, where tehsil offices and police stations were attacked. These actions were spontaneous and largely uncoordinated, as most rebel soldiers had already moved toward Faizabad.¹⁰ By June 4, the entire Azamgarh region and its western parts came under the control of the Palwar Rajputs of Koyals. British authority was restored only after July 12, when Benbales was appointed magistrate with loyal troops.¹¹ The Palwars, under Prithvipal Singh’s leadership, briefly recaptured the city and collected ten thousand rupees from merchants. Remarkably, rival clans such as the Palwars and Rajkumar Rajputs united against the British.¹² Local landlord Muzzafar Zahan captured and fortified Mahul tehsil in June, which the British regained after a month-long struggle. From June to November, Atraulia and Koyals remained under rebel control with assistance from Awadh insurgents. In September, Kurmi Raja Beni Madhva of Atraulia was defeated by Gorkha forces but later reclaimed the Atraulia fort with Awadh rebels on November 4.¹³ Official records note that over four thousand rebels operated in northern Azamgarh, so numerous that even stationed Gorkha troops hesitated to confront them.¹⁴

The final phase of organized resistance in the region began in March 1858 with the arrival of Kunwar Singh. He reached Atraulia on March 18 with nearly five to six thousand soldiers and successfully defeated the British troops, forcing them and Collector Dey Winson to retreat to Azamgarh.¹⁵ Kunwar Singh then advanced toward Azamgarh, where he camped for about twenty-two days. During this period, British officers and soldiers were surrounded inside the fort as rebel forces continued heavy shelling and gunfire, though without a decisive victory. According to official British records, Kunwar Singh remained in the district for around thirty-five days before being overpowered by British forces and eventually retreating toward Ghazipur.¹⁶

The sepoy revolt in Banaras cantonment began on June 4, 1857, when soldiers opened indiscriminate fire as officers attempted to disarm them. British authorities attempted to create communal tension by spreading rumours that Muslims planned to hoist their religious flag over the Vishweshwar temple, though this was later found to be false.¹⁷ Although the sepoy uprising was suppressed, widespread anarchy persisted across the district, with local people targeting the lives and property of the British and their supporters, and communication with neighbouring districts was disrupted. A British observer noted that popular resistance appeared to continue the unfinished plans of the rebel soldiers, with significant participation from rural society.¹⁸ Two Banaras bankers, Bhairo Prasad and Ishwari Prasad, were executed for conspiracy and sedition.¹⁹ Strong resistance was also seen in Bhadohi and Gopiganj, led by Udwant Singh, Jhoori Singh, and Sangram Singh. Udwant Singh, chief of the Maunas Rajput clan, attempted to capture the G.T. Road but was arrested and hanged, prompting his widow to call for vengeance. Local leaders Jhoori Singh and Dhanwan Singh attacked the indigo factory at Pali, killing Moore, the joint magistrate, and factory owner Jones, with Moore’s head sent to Udwant Singh’s widow. Jhoori Singh emerged as a key figure in the area’s popular resistance, attacking British supporters in Suriyawan (August 19) and Bisauli (August 21). A Reward of One thousand rupees was announced for the arrest of Jhoori Singh and his 3 of his main supporters.²⁰ while remaining active in Jaunpur and Allahabad until May 1858, according to official records.²¹

The revolution in Jaunpur began on June 6, 1857, following news of the massacre of Sikh soldiers in Banaras. The Sikh sepoys killed their commanding officer and the joint magistrate, looted the treasury and arms, and marched toward Lucknow. Subsequently, local residents attacked Europeans and their collaborators, setting fire to houses and properties. British civilians and officers took refuge in the Puseva indigo factory and were safely escorted to Banaras on June 9.²² The Raghuvanshi Rajputs of the Dobhi area, along with members of other communities, played a significant role in the uprising, taking control of the highway between Jaunpur and Azamgarh, which blocked reinforcements to Azamgarh. A British force under Chapman defeated the rebels on June 30 after heavy rains rendered their gunpowder ineffective.²³ The rebels regrouped and attempted to march toward Banaras but were decisively defeated on July 17.²⁴ Popular resistance resurfaced in April 1858 with Kunwar Singh at Azamgarh, but the revolt was suppressed by May 1858. In October 1857, plans for a local uprising at Sigramau under feudal leadership failed due to the defeat of Nazim Mehdi Hasan of Sultanpur at Kadua.²⁵ From December 1857 to April 1858, popular resistance continued under the leadership of landlord brothers Jogeshwar Baksh and Arjun Singh of Badalapur, whose 100 supporters torched the indigo factory at Koeripur. Sangram Singh led further resistance in Mariahu, attacking government establishments and supporters of the British and looting Mariahu Tehsil.²⁶

In the early phase, Ghazipur district remained largely peaceful and did not witness a sepoy revolt. British officers and civilians from Azamgarh, after vacating the city, took refuge in Ghazipur. However, civil rebellion soon emerged as local people attacked the properties of British supporters. The treasury was moved to Banaras, and martial law was imposed to restore order.²⁷ The indigo factory in Chaura village was attacked, forcing its owner, Mathews, to flee, while cavalry ransacked the village and set several houses on fire.²⁸ On June 8, *The Hindu Intelligencer* of Calcutta reported temporary peace following the disarming of sepoys, but warned that this was only a “lull before the storm” and opined that a small spark is enough to ignite the devastating fire.²⁹ The second phase of the revolt was more intense, with local residents and some rebel soldiers attacking offices, residences, and the indigo factory at Gahmar.³⁰ Magar Rai of Gahmar emerged as a key leader of the popular resistance and later confessed to armed rebellion during his trial.³¹ Saidpur Tehsil also witnessed uprisings in June 1858 when Kunwar Singh attempted to pass through the district.³² Jagdishpur. Rebel activity continued in September 1858 in Bara, where W. Brown, commander of the St. Martin gunboat, reported attacks by zamindars' men and the destruction of forty boats at Bara and Zemamia, along with a large gathering of rebels at Gahmar. Military suppression by General Douglas in October 1858 ultimately restored peace in the area.³³

A notable incident occurred in Bailia when Kunwar Singh arrived in the area in April 1858. He engaged with local landlords and leaders of various caste panchayats, and traces of popular resistance were observed in Bailia and Rasra. To mislead the British, Kunwar Singh spread news that he would cross the Ganga River on elephant back, prompting the British military to prepare for an expected confrontation. Instead, he crossed the river at Sheopur Ghat, seven miles from the city. During the crossing, the last ferry carrying Kunwar Singh came under fire, injuring his arm. Subsequently, Kunwar Singh, along with local rebels, launched attacks on Europeans and their supporters, targeting both their persons and properties.³⁴

Gorakhpur came under the control of rebel forces, with Mohamad Hassan declared as the Nazim of the region on August 13, 1857. British sources acknowledge that around 10–12 thousand men fought under him, of whom only about 5,000 had any formal training and were employees of zamindars and talukedars.³⁵ The remaining 5–7 thousand were ordinary people from diverse religious, caste, and sectarian backgrounds. The rebels eventually lost Gorakhpur and offered only minimal resistance to British and Gurkha forces on January 6, 1858, restoring British authority in the district.³⁶ Letters recovered from Md. Hassan reveal communication with neighboring rebel leaders and indicate support in men and resources from most regional zamindars and talukedars. These letters also highlight the involvement of certain middle-level government officers, notably Muslims, including Deputy Collector Wahid Ali and his three brothers, Fateh Ali Beg and Zamir Ali.³⁷ In a dispatch to the Court of Directors of the East India Company dated October 3, 1857, the Governor-General acknowledged Md. Hassan's control over Gorakhpur while cautioning that reported communal divisions among Hindu zamindars could not be fully relied upon.³⁸

After the fall of Gorakhpur, rebel forces advanced westward and established a new front at Amorah, eight miles from Ayodhya. The rebel army, numbering around 15,000, was led by Nazim Mehdi Hasan of Sultanpur, the Rajas of Gonda, Nanpara Churda, and Atraulia (Beni Madhva), along with the Rani of Amorah.³⁹ On March 2, 1858, British Commander Rowcroft attempted an attack but retreated upon seeing the superior strength of the rebels. During fierce battles on March 4 and 5, British forces were surrounded, though the rebels eventually pulled back slightly.⁴⁰ British troops also withdrew to Captainganj without

achieving their objectives. Md. Hasan reinforced the rebels at Amorah with 4,000 men, but on June 9, 1858, Rowcroft captured Amorah. Md. Hasan was later defeated at Auda on June 18 and fled to Tuslipur, where Bala Rao, brother of Nana Saheb, was stationed with his forces.⁴¹ Conflicting reports exist regarding his fate: Hope Grant claimed that Md. Hasan surrendered and was in his custody on May 10, 1859, at Bishakohar, offering assistance in Nana Saheb's arrest, while another source stated that he had fled to Nepal and joined Hazrat Mahal on April 6.⁴²

The writings of British historians have already been discussed. Concerning the revolt in the Awadh region, senior officials of the East India Company described it as a legitimate war. In a confidential letter from East India House, London, to the Governor-General dated April 19, 1858, it was stated: "we must admit that under these circumstances the hostilities which have been carried on in Oude have rather the character of legitimate war than that of rebellion." Even Governor-General Canning observed that the issue had transcended mere mutiny, reflecting a national sentiment that had evolved into a broader national revolt.⁴³ This characterization applies to the rebellion as a whole. While the uprising was initially led by sepoys of the Bengal Army and later supported by feudal elements such as zamindars and talukedars, the true driving force behind the revolt was the active participation of the common people.

In eastern Uttar Pradesh, the revolt saw participation from people across all sections, castes, and religions, as the region had relatively few large landlords and talukedars. Notably, individuals from so-called high castes fought under the leadership of backward caste leaders. A prominent example of such leadership was Kurmi Raja Beni Madhva of Atraulia, who commanded a force of popular resistance that included Rajputs, Brahmins, and Ahirs. Visits to several villages in eastern U.P., where battles of 1857 took place, reveal that the events remain vivid in collective memory, with local communities expressing pride in their ancestors' struggle against foreign rule. Numerous folk songs celebrate the contributions of local heroes, depicting their role in the liberation struggle. Kunwar Singh and Beni Madhva, in particular, became central figures in regional folklore. While British sources acknowledged the involvement of local people, they dismissed them as mere gangs of bandits.

¹ Saxena, Pradip. *Atharah Saw Satavan Aur Bharatiya Nav Jagaran*. Aadhar Prakashan.1996. p.172.

² Ibid.p.172.

³ Ibid.p.173.

⁴ Ibid.p.181.

⁵ *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, Vol. IV.p.144

⁶ Ibid.p.151.

⁷ Ibid.pp.161-163

⁸ Chaudhari, S.B., *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies*, World Press.1957. p. 147

⁹ Nash J.T., *Volunteering in India* , pp.40, 45.

¹⁰ Azamgarh collectorate pre-mutiny record, bast no. 1, Revenue record file no.24, p. 1 98 (Translation from Urdu).

¹¹ *F.S.U.P.*, Vol. IV, p.27.

¹² Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indies , (henceforth, F.P.), Vol. VII, pp. 265-269

¹³ Malleson G.B., *History of Indian Mutiny*, Vol.11, W. H. Allen & Co. 1878. pp.319-320.

¹⁴ Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indie.Vol.IX.pp.701-702.

¹⁵ *F.S.U.P*, Vol.IV,p.109

¹⁶ Azamgarh Collectorate Pre-mutiny record file, no. 24, p.168.

¹⁷ *F.S.U.P.*, Vol. IV, p.20.

¹⁸ Chic, N.A., *The Annals of Indian rebellion*, John Murray, 1859. p.383.

¹⁹ Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indie. Vol.IX.p.218.

²⁰ Diary of Deputy Collector Mirzapur, P. Walker, Mirzapur Collectorate, mutiny records.

²¹ F.S.U.P, Vol. IV, pp.232, 2

²² Ibid., p.23.

²³ Singh, Rakesh. *San Sattawan Ka Jan Pratiroh aur Dobhi*. Aitihasiki, 2000-2001, pp. 155-156.

²⁴ F.S.U.P, Vol.IV,p.25.

²⁵ Chaudhari S.B., op. cit., p.151.

²⁶ F.S.U.P., Vol. IV, p.230.

²⁷ Ibid.,p.115

²⁸ Ibid., p.115.

²⁹ Hindu Intelligencer (Calcutta), 8 June 1 857, p. 182.

³⁰ F.S.U.P, Vol.IV,pp.117-119.

³¹ State vs. Mager Singh case, file no.74, Ghazipur Collectorate, mutiny Basta. RAUP. Allahabad.

³² Chaudhari, op. cit., p. 157.

³³ Ibid.,p.157.

³⁴ Sunder, Lal. *Bharat Mein Angrez Raj*.p.929.

³⁵ Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indie. Vol.VII.p.220

³⁶ Malleson, op. cit., p. 323

³⁷ Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indie. Vol.IX.p.220

³⁸ Further papers relative to the Mutinies in the East Indie., Enclosure no. 8, p.84.

³⁹ Chaudhari, op. cit., p. 145

⁴⁰ Nash, op.cit., p. 63.

⁴¹ Malleson, Vol. III, pp.280-281

⁴² Mukherjee, Rudrangshu, *Awadh in Revolt 1857-58 - A Study of Popular Resistance* ,Oxford Publication.

⁴³ p. 133.

⁴⁴ Joshi P.C. (Edited), *Rebellion 1857 - A Symposium*. People's Publishing House, 1957. p. 168