

The Indian Uprising of 1857–8

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The Indian Uprising of 1857–8

Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion

Clare Anderson



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I dedicate this book to my dearest Sam and our children Hugh and James, with much love and affection.

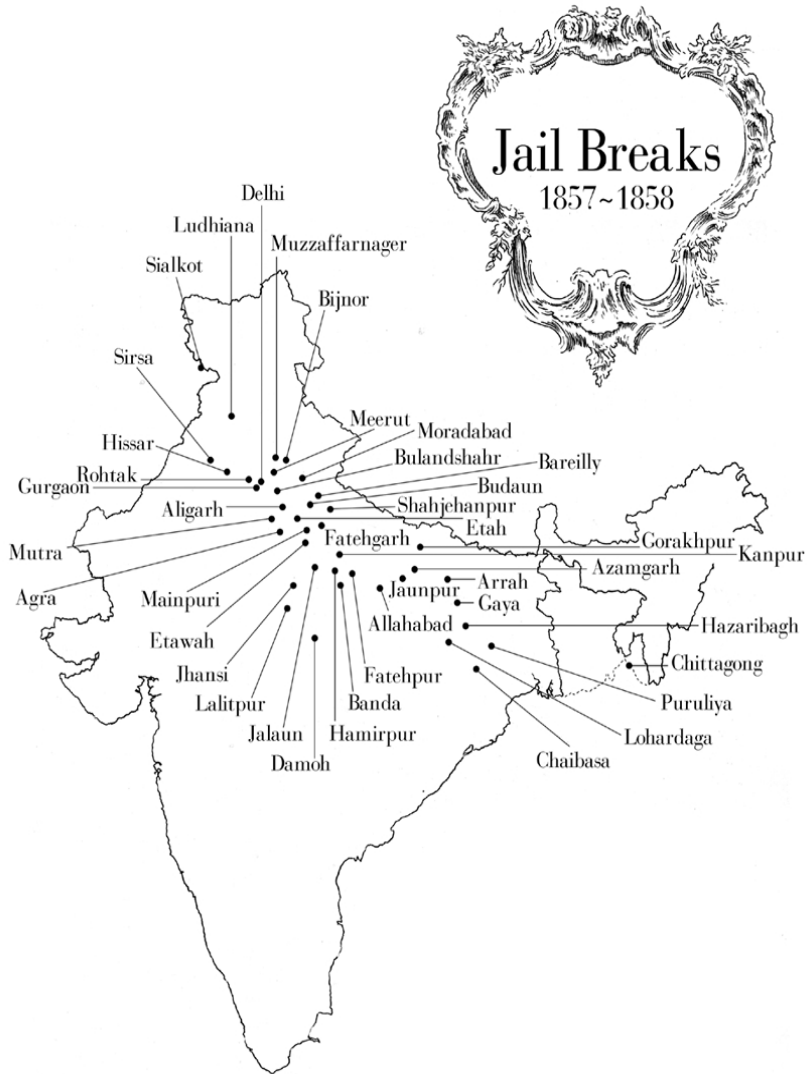
A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Given the incarceration of undertrial and convicted prisoners (civil and criminal) in the same penal institutions during this period, the descriptive categories ‘jail’ and ‘prison’ are used interchangeably. In order to distinguish residents of jails from those transported overseas, the terms ‘prisoner’ and ‘convict’ are used to denote inmates of mainland Indian jails and penal settlements respectively.

Place names have been transliterated according to modern conventions (hence Kanpur not Cawnpore), though where places have changed their name since the mid-nineteenth century, the nineteenth-century appellation has been retained (hence Madras not Chennai).

Finally, the terms ‘mutiny-rebellion’, ‘revolt’, and ‘uprising’ refer to widespread army and civilian unrest across north India during 1857–8.

MAP



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

O come and look!
In the bazaar of Meerut.
The Feringi is waylaid and beaten!
The whiteman is waylaid and beaten!
In the open bazaar of Meerut.
Look! O Look!¹

Few events in the history of the British Empire have attracted as much interest or controversy as the Indian mutiny-rebellion of 1857–8. Since its immediate aftermath historical readings of the tumultuous events that swept across north India during these years have focussed largely on the causes of the revolt, and explanations for it are many and various. This reflects the multi-faceted character of the military and popular uprisings that fuelled and sustained events. Widespread mutiny in the Bengal army was accompanied rapidly by massive civil unrest, and few communities in rebellious areas in the North-West Provinces, Awadh, and western Bihar were unaffected. Though British and Indian historians have claimed variously that the unrest was ‘mutiny’, ‘rebellion’, or ‘war of independence’, it is impossible to capture the essence or meaning of the revolt in such simplistic, singular ways.²

Mutiny first erupted in the cantonment of Meerut on 9 May 1857, provoked by the fettering and imprisonment of a group of *sowars* (cavalrymen) and sepoys (from the Persian *sipahi*, meaning native infantry) who had refused to use a new issue of cartridges allegedly greased with animal fat. Military mutiny fanned civil unrest and that night sepoys and rebels broke open the town’s two prisons. This triggered a pattern of revolt that was repeated over and over again during the military and civil disturbances that gripped north India during 1857–8. In a stark challenge to the notion that the nineteenth century witnessed an uncontested imperial expansion of the carceral continuum, altogether mutineers and rebels attacked 41 prisons,

mainly in the North-West Provinces and western Bihar, and released just over 23,000 prisoners, many of whom subsequently slipped out of the purview of the colonial state. This left the British with an unprecedented penal crisis, for notwithstanding the many thousands of escaped prisoners hiding out in the districts, making for home or joining the rebel cause, rebels damaged and destroyed a large number of jails. Gradually, Company troops quelled the revolt, but in many towns and cities there were no secure buildings to hold either recaptured prisoners or mutineers and rebels under arrest. British fears about the further spread of rebellion in territories associated with India led to the temporary abandonment of the transportation of convicts to existing penal settlements in the Straits Settlements (Pinang, Melaka, Singapore) and Burma (Arakan, Tenasserim Provinces). In this context, extant yet still vague proposals to settle the as yet unsuccessfully colonized Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal rapidly took shape, and in 1858 the British established a penal colony for the reception of mutineer-rebel convicts at the new site of Port Blair.

This book's point of departure is mutiny-rebellion jail-breaking and its consequences. It is not an exhaustive rewriting of the events of 1857–8; rather its aim is to use the revolt and its aftermath to probe the nature and meaning of incarceration in colonial north India. The pages that follow will examine the reflexive processes that characterized the relationship between colonial cultures of confinement and north Indian communities during the period to the 1860s. The book's central premise is that the mutiny-rebellion was a decisive moment in the history of Indian imprisonment, for it consolidated the colonial jail as a crucial site of provocation and coalescence concerning British interventions into cultural affairs. As we will see, mutineer-rebels targeted jails during the revolt not only for practical purposes such as the acquisition of labour and supplies, but also because they saw them as one of the principal instruments of colonial rule and the multiple cultural and religious transgressions that implied. In turn, in seeking solutions to the crushing penal crisis facing north India post-1858, though in many ways the mutiny-rebellion assured continuity in long-term penal trends it also secured innovative changes in the agenda of overseas transportation. The revolt of 1857–8 thus marked an important moment in the colonial history of incarceration both as a mode of control and as a social institution.

The Indian Uprising

During 1857–8 over one hundred thousand troops - over two-thirds of the entire Bengal army – mutinied. Almost all the cavalry and artillery and 70

infantry regiments rose against their commanders. The enlisted men were mainly small landholders. The majority of the infantry (who made up the bulk of the army) were *Brahmins* (of the priestly caste) or other high-caste Hindus, and most of the cavalry (numbering about 19,000) were Muslims or Pathans. Forty thousand came from the newly annexed Kingdom of Awadh.³ Widespread social unrest both accompanied mutiny and spread across Awadh and the North-West Provinces to western Bihar, constituting the largest and most threatening rebellion in the history of the nineteenth-century British Empire. We know little about the impact of the revolt in other areas. Bombay in the west and Madras in the south were seemingly unaffected, though this seems rather anomalous for sepoy disaffection itself can be traced back to southern India.

In what historians view commonly as a precedent for the more general uprising of 1857–8, in 1806 several regiments mutinied at Vellore after soldiers were ordered to appear bare checked and wear new headgear with a leather cockade (rosette). *Quranic* mores meant that Muslims did not shave or in some cases even trim their beards, while Hindu religious tradition proscribed the wearing of leather. Further factors in the run-up to 1857–8 were army disquiet over the professional threat posed by the opening up of service to recruits from non-traditional regions or castes, ineffective army leadership, limited prospects for promotion, grumblings over discriminatory pay (British soldiers received better wages), and the General Service Enlistment Act (1856) which made service outside the Bengal Presidency (including in Awadh) compulsory. Not only did the act remove the financial benefits of foreign service, it threatened potentially customs relating to caste. Christian missionaries, and even military commanders like the evangelical General Hugh Wheeler who was commanding the troops at Kanpur at the outbreak of mutiny, were by this time preaching openly to sepoy regiments, and fears about loss of caste if not forced conversion to Christianity were widespread.

By the beginning of 1857 rumours about a new rifle cartridge issue were circulating among regiments. Allegedly, the cartridges were encased in gelatine-stiffened paper and greased with pig or cow fat. Because the ends needed to be bitten off before use they transgressed the cultural mores of Muslims, for whom pigs were unclean, and of Hindus, to whom cows were sacred. The first sign of discontent itself was in February, when the regiment at Berhampur refused to use new cartridges and so its officers disarmed and dismissed it. There was a further mutiny at the Barrackpur cantonment in March. A few weeks later, the third Bengal cavalry in Meerut also refused to accept newly issued cartridges. Officers arrested, court-martialled, and