

Rethinking ‘The Causes of the Indian Revolt’

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Abstract

‘The Causes of the Indian Revolt’ by Syed Ahmed Khan was one of the first contemporary works on the revolt of 1857. Syed Ahmed Khan is widely perceived as a British ‘loyalist’, who wrote the work to obviate British suspicions about the active role of the Muslim community in the rebellion. In his opinion, the rebellion was not a conspiracy or a war of religion. However, according to Syed Ahmed Khan, British policies related to land and ‘interference’ in matters of religion were the main causes of the rebellion. He advocated that the British needed to pay greater heed to the ‘voice of the people’ and Indians had to be represented in legislative councils. This dialogue with the British government would ensure that another great rebellion did not occur in Hindustan. A close reading of the work, however, reveals that it was a strong critique of hundred years of British rule in India with references to ‘ruin’, increasing ‘poverty’, and loss of land and honour for almost all the ‘Hindustanees’. Syed Ahmed Khan created a juxtaposition between Indian Hindus and Muslims on one hand, and the British on the other. Lack of effective control over the army and British contempt for natives went into the making of the rebellion. Potential loss of ‘independence’, de-industrialization and drain of wealth out of India created grounds for antipathy towards the British. The causes, elucidated in the work, in turn can be linked to the widespread popular base of the rebellion.

Keywords: 1857, rebellion, land, religion, Hindustanee

The revolt of 1857 is a celebrated anti-colonial movement in Indian and world history. The revolt inspired Indian nationalist writings, poetry, and the national movement. British sources characterized it as a sepoy mutiny - thereby limiting its scope and participation -, a conspiracy, or a war of religion. Indian scholarship views the revolt as a popular movement - or a resistance movement of various sections of indigenous population.¹

1 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *Rethinking 1857*, New Delhi, 2007.; Biswamoy Pati, ed., *The 1857 Rebellion*, New Delhi, 2007. Both the works deal with historiography of the revolt of 1857.

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